

## **YOUNG ADULT CARERS AND THE 21 HOUR RULE - Sept 2023**

This policy briefing is calling for young adult carers to be exempt from the 21 hour rule in the benefit system (also known as the full time education rule), which means that they cannot claim Carer's Allowance if they study for more than 21 hours per week.

Implementing this simple policy change would help young adult carers to participate in learning and gain qualifications, including 'gold standard' qualifications such as T levels, that will improve their career prospects. Many young adult carers say that they are put off doing full-time courses because of the 21 hour rule. This change would make a big difference to their lives.

### **Who are young adult carers?**

Young adult carers are young people aged 16-24 who provide unpaid care to someone, usually a family member, on a regular basis. The 2021 Census identified 272,731 young adult carers aged 16-24 in England and Wales, the equivalent of around 1 in 21 young people. Of these, around 37,000 young people provide over 50 hours of care each week. However, the real number of young adult carers is much higher as many do not consider themselves to be carers or are worried about disclosing their caring role. It's estimated that these young people provide over £3.5bn<sup>1</sup> of unpaid care per year.

Young adult carers often give up their childhoods to care for others. Yet, through no fault of their own, they consistently miss out on opportunities in learning and work and say that their wellbeing is affected:

- On average, carers miss 5% of school days because of caring, and caring interferes with a quarter of all school days<sup>2</sup>.
- Young adult carers have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE, the equivalent to nine grades lower overall than their peers.
- 24% of young adult carers in school say they cannot afford to go to college or university<sup>3</sup>.
- 57% of young adult carers say that they 'usually' or 'always' worry about the cost of living crisis and things becoming more expensive.<sup>4</sup>
- Young adult carers are three times as likely to be NEET (not in education, employment or training) compared to other young people.<sup>5</sup>
- Young adult carers are 4 times more likely to drop out of college and university than a student without caring responsibilities<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Calculated using 2021 census data and the May 2023 National Living Wage rate of £10.42 per hour. Assuming that young adult carers, aged 16-24, provide the mid-point hours of care per week, within the lower ranges provided in the census data, and 60 hours per week for the highest.

<sup>2</sup> Sempik and Becker, 2013, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Carers Trust, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Being a carer is not a choice; it's just what we do, Carers Trust, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Audit Commission, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Time to be Heard, Carers Trust Wales, 2015

- Young adult carers are 38% less likely to gain a university degree qualification than non-carers. This inequality is magnified for young people who provide high levels of care, with those who care for 35+ hours per week 86% less likely to gain a degree<sup>7</sup>.
- 44% of young adult carers report that they ‘usually’ or ‘always’ feel stressed because of their caring role.<sup>8</sup>
- 40% of young and young adult carers say that they ‘never’ or ‘not often’ get help in education to balance caring and school, college or university work.<sup>9</sup>

*“I was 14 when my mum suddenly became ill. Everything fell apart. Mum had to stop work, we had no money and there was nobody to look after us. Gradually everything became my responsibility – looking after my little sister, cooking and cleaning, helping mum to get around and sorting out her tablets. Eventually I left school. I couldn’t look after mum and Jess and go to school. I’m 17 now, with no GCSEs and hardly any friends. Things have settled down a bit at home, but I feel like I’ve missed my chance. I’d like to get qualifications and a job, but we can’t afford to lose my benefits. I couldn’t cope with GCSEs two years ago, so I don’t suppose it would be any different now.” Sarah, young adult carer, aged 17.*

### What is the 21 hour rule?

Carer’s Allowance is a benefit of £76.75 per week. It can be claimed by people:

- Over the age of 16 who care for someone at least 35 hours per week, if they receive certain benefits.
- Who earn less than £139 per week (after deductions).
- Who are not studying for more than 21 hours per week/in full time education.

This means that young adult carers who care for 35+ hours per week, are forced to choose between claiming Carer’s Allowance OR being in education. Young adult carers and their families typically live in low income households, often in poverty. Through no fault of their own they miss out on learning, and on the normal experiences and opportunities that other young people take for granted.

The 21 hour/full time education rule effectively pushes young adult carers away from education, as they often cannot afford to give up the vital financial support that Carer’s Allowance provides. This reinforces the disadvantage that young adult carers face, trapping them in a caring role and preventing them from gaining the skills, qualification and experience to build a life of their own.

---

<sup>7</sup> Does providing informal care in young adulthood impact education attainment and employment in the UK? Advances in Life Care Research journal, June 2023. Baowen X.

<sup>8</sup> Being a carer is not a choice; it’s just what we do, Carers Trust, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Being a carer is not a choice; it’s just what we do, Carers Trust, 2023.

## What policy change is needed?

We are calling on the government to exempt young adult carers, aged 16-24, from the 21 hour/full time education rule that currently prevents them from claiming Carer's Allowance and studying at the same time.

No young adult carers should miss out on learning because they care for their families. This policy change would make a significant difference in opening up opportunities, such as T-levels and A-levels, for young adult carers who have missed out on so much. As part of changes being made to Carer's Allowance in Scotland, the Scottish Government has recently announced that from 2024, entitlement will be extended to carers in full time education. Governments in other parts of the UK should follow this example.

Our calculations show that the cost of providing Carer's Allowance to all eligible young adult carers aged 16-24 in further education (up to and including level 3) is estimated at £54m per year<sup>10</sup>. To extend this to all young adult carers, studying at any level, the cost is estimated at £85m per year.

At the very least, 16-18 year olds should be exempt from the rule, as this would enable young adult carers to study the 'gold standard' T-levels and A-levels. For young adult carers aged 16-18 the cost is estimated at £31m per year.

Implementing this policy change would have educational and economic benefits for young adult carers and the country. It will enable more young people with caring responsibilities to study, to complete their courses and to gain 'flagship' qualifications such as T levels, improving their employment prospects and earnings as a result.

## Find out more

If you have any questions about this briefing or would like to discuss further please contact Nicola Aylward, Head of Learning for Young People, [Nicola.Aylward@learningandwork.org.uk](mailto:Nicola.Aylward@learningandwork.org.uk)

## Follow us

You can follow us on Twitter on [@LearnWorkUK](https://twitter.com/LearnWorkUK) and [@LearnWorkCymru](https://twitter.com/LearnWorkCymru). [Find us on LinkedIn](#).

## About Learning and Work Institute

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

**Stay informed. Be involved. Keep engaged. Sign up to become a Learning and Work Institute supporter: [learningandwork.org.uk/supporters](https://learningandwork.org.uk/supporters)**

---

<sup>10</sup> Calculations available from L&W. Please contact Nicola Aylward.