

PE1470/L

Mr. Chris Hynd
Assistant Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP



3rd May 2013

Dear Mr. Hynd,

Re: Responses to Public Petition PE1470

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the comments on my petition from the eleven organisations and I'd like to thank them for taking the time to share their views. It is clear the enormous contribution Young Carers bring in all parts of Scotland has not gone completely unnoticed and that very important work is being done in many areas to support young people who care. It is also clear there is much more that can, and should, be done. From the encouraging words of support in the responses, I am convinced that the idea I have outlined in my petition has the potential to make a big and positive difference to the lives of many of the approximately 100,000 Young Carers in Scotland.

The responses detailed a number of valuable initiatives from around the country. In particular I was interested to hear about some innovative and helpful projects that I was not aware of before. Other pieces of work, such as Getting It Right for Young Carers, the Young Carers Festival and the pilot Young Carers Card are well-known to me and the Young Carers I work with through forums and groups I take part in. These are worthwhile projects and have many positive benefits for Young Carers, but at the same time there is only so much that they can hope to address. From my perspective, there seems to be a great deal of work going on to provide information to young people who identify as Young Carers, developing projects to give a them a voice, provide advice or other support such as short respite breaks. However, none of the initiatives outlined in the responses specifically address the significant problem which my petition seeks to rectify - financial support to help Young Carers stay in full-time education.

Educational Maintenance Allowance is mentioned in many of the responses, with helpful information about how it operates in different parts of the country. EMA is very significant to this issue as it provides a good existing model for how a Young Carers Grant could operate, or with some modifications to the criteria for awarding it, address a number of the barriers to financial support that Young Carers face.

There appears to be a small number of misconceptions amongst the responses relating to the proposals in the petition, which I am happy to address. North Lanarkshire Council raise concerns about the prospect of a Young Carers Grant replacing EMA, and would not support it on that basis. I would not support that either, and would like to take this opportunity to clarify that a Young Carers

Grant, as envisaged in my petition, would not replace EMA. I imagine the Grant sitting alongside and complementing EMA, rather than acting as an out-and-out substitute.

Another concern that I am happy to address was raised in both West Lothian Council's response and by one of the Young Carers' groups consulted as part of the Scottish Young Carers Services Alliance's response. This concern regarded a Young Carers Grant potentially acting as an encouragement to young people to drop out of full-time education. Again, I would like to reassure them this would not be the case. The Young Carers Grant would be specifically intended to support Young Carers to remain in full-time education, so those who left would no longer be entitled to claim it. In fact, this is far more likely to be a factor at the moment, as young people in full-time education are not entitled to claim Carers Allowance, which at £58 per week is more than the £30 per week available to EMA recipients.

As someone who is both a Young Carer and an EMA recipient, and having discussed the issue with other Carers who have had problems qualifying for EMA, two problems are apparent when it comes to financial support to help Young Carers stay in full-time education. Firstly, since EMA is means-tested it is not necessarily available to all Young Carers who require financial support. Due to their personal circumstances it is entirely possible for Young Carers to be in a household with a higher household income, but who require financial support to be able to stay in full-time education.

The most significant problem with the criteria for Young Carers are the attendance requirements - in most cases 100% attendance is required, which for a Young Carer is often simply not possible. For instance, Young Carers will need to take time off school to take relatives to hospital or doctor's appointments, or to look after the person they care for at a particular time, which will disqualify them for EMA and cut off an avenue to help them stay in education. Whilst some schools understand why they may be unable to attend school due to their caring responsibilities and are supportive, others have reported their schools struggle to grasp the nature of the caring responsibilities and why it may involve a higher level of absence than for other pupils.

Importantly, this should include helping Young Carers access financial support, both by informing them of a Young Carers Grant or equivalent, and recognising that due to their caring responsibilities they may not be able to maintain 100% attendance. In the responses from SYCSA and Aberdeenshire Council it appears that valuable work is either planned or already underway seeking to address this. Their projects which involve speaking with schools to help them understand the nature of a caring responsibility for a young person, and how they can best support Young Carers at the school are extremely important and have the potential to make a real difference. However, this does not happen everywhere and is very reliant on particular initiatives by local voluntary projects or local authorities. National leadership is required to ensure every school and college in Scotland is aware of the challenges of being a Young Carer, can accept this may require time off school (often on short notice), be prepared to proactively put support arrangements in place, and help identify unrecognised carers.

Reforms to the criteria for EMA, to make it suitable for Young Carers by adjusting the means-tested and attendance requirement elements have the potential to make a significant improvement in several of the areas I have outlined above, and therefore I am disappointed the Scottish Government rules this out in their response. Given this, I feel they should seriously consider establishing a distinct Young Carers Grant. Not only would it have the positive effects of my suggested changes to the EMA criteria, its existence has the potential to alert to unrecognised Young Carers that they are entitled to support to help them balance their caring responsibilities and their education.

I was also struck by another issue that seems to be a big concern for a number of the organisations that responded, in particular in those from Aberdeenshire and East Lothian Councils. Many young people who provide care to relatives are not identified as Young Carers. In my experience, that is indeed a significant issue and appears to be the case for a few different reasons. Through the Young Carers Project I work with, as well as from discussions with a number of young people and adults who care for others, I know there are many people who are aware that they would be classified as a Carer, but do not want to think of themselves that way. This can be because they don't want to be thought of as such, or as was pointed out in the Committee meeting on 1st March, because they consider looking after a relative a normal part of their life, an act of love towards a relative that they don't expect support from government to carry out.

However, there are also a large number of young people who care, who simply aren't aware that they would qualify as a Young Carer, or therefore be entitled to any support for the role they perform. For instance, after taking part in debates and discussions about support for Young Carers at Scottish Youth Parliament Sittings, several MSYPs commented to me that the definition of a Young Carer would apply to them, but weren't aware of it until then, or even that there was such a thing as a 'Young Carer'. This is a big issue relating to their ability to stay in full-time education - if they are not aware that they might be entitled to any support or advice, their education will suffer as a result, due to struggling to juggle their caring responsibilities with a school that expects full attendance. This has the effect of completely ruling them out of any financial support through EMA and greatly increases the likelihood that they will be forced to leave school.

Whilst a Young Carers Grant would not entirely fix this, I believe it would help to raise awareness. For instance, if included as part of information on what support young people would be entitled to at school, along with information on EMA, it may well result in an increase in the numbers of young people who are aware they qualify as a Young Carer and would be able to access the support on offer for the role.

Another advantage of the establishment of a distinct Young Carers Grant is that it could allow financial support to be extended to Young Carers in Higher Education as well as the school and college students covered by EMA. Whilst most of my direct experience is of consulting with school-aged Young Carers, I am aware that for many their caring responsibilities are a barrier to them considering university as an option. These include concerns about not being able to attend mandatory

classes, not being able to manage the demanding workload of their course, or not being to move away from home due to their responsibilities.

A distinct Young Carers Grant could help with the additional travel costs incurred through staying at home, allow students to cover the financial costs associated with caring that are covered for non-students through Carers Allowance, and play a big part in what the National Union of Students describes as a 'hidden demographic'¹. Whilst it appears that some individual institutions, such as the University of Glasgow² have created Carers' Policies, these do not necessarily provide financial support, or entitle Student Carers to additional support through SAAS. I would be interested to learn whether research has been conducted into how many Young Carers have declined to apply for a university place because of these concerns, whether it has led to increased drop-out and whether any specific funds exist to provide financial support to Student Carers.

In conclusion, I would once again like to thank the Committee for considering my petition and the organisations that responded with a great deal of useful information and supportive comments. I believe Young Carers should not have to make an impossible choice between their education and caring for family members who would not be able to manage without their help. Despite much welcome progress over the last few years towards greater support and information for Young Carers, none of these initiatives solve the problem that Young Carers have particular financial needs that they can't cover through Carers Allowance, or in many cases through EMA, and are forced to make this impossible choice every day. I am more convinced than ever that urgent action is required to address this and am hopeful that my petition will be the first step towards achieving this.

Yours sincerely,

Lauren King MSYP

¹ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/womens/NUS-student-carers/>

² http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_199270_en.pdf