



Evaluation of the Young Carers Program

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July 2024

Acknowledgement of Country

In the spirit of reconciliation, CSI UWA acknowledges that their operations are situated on Noongar land, and that the Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practise their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their elders and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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Suggested Citation: Lester L., Scullin B., Lester R., Zou S., & Flatau P. (2024). *Evaluation of the Young Carers Program*. Perth: Centre for Social Impact, The University of Western Australia.
<https://doi.org/10.60836/b5r3-pf85>

Keywords: Youth, Carers, evaluation, impact

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through rolling out of the national Carer Gateway program in Western Australia (WA), Carers WA became aware of the need for more comprehensive youth-centric services, that expanded beyond opportunities for respite. The Carer Gateway program was intended to support all carers with 25% of tailored support packages allocated to support young carers (YCs). The need for YC supports was reinforced when the newly established program received many complex referrals from schools. The influx of these referrals also made it clear that the YC Program would not be delivered as an early intervention, capacity-building program (as intended), but rather in response to existing challenges.

A mixed-methods impact evaluation was completed to assess the extent to which the provision of YC Program activities and services improve outcomes in the short, medium, and longer terms. All evaluation tools were co-designed and reviewed with Carers WA. To determine the social impact of the YC Program, administrative data were analysed, and interviews, surveys and case studies were completed to collect additional data. Interviews and surveys were completed by YCs, YC Program team members, Carer WA management, and other stakeholders.

Ten themes were identified after analysing the available data; increased awareness, increased knowledge of YC roles and responsibilities, increased wellbeing, being prepared and equipped, effective communication, inclusivity, increased quality of life, knowledge of school and career pathways, improved family relationships, and improved confidence in help-seeking. Demonstrated outcomes included an increased awareness of parents in how to support YCs.

An average of almost 750 registrations and 630 Youth Needs Assessments a year have been completed over the last four years (2020-2024) within the YC Program. Awareness campaigns have targeted 35 schools and 48 community groups. YC awareness about the choices they have and the help available to them, their responsibilities and their role, has increased after involvement with the YC Program. Similarly, the Program often improved YC's resilience, their awareness of education/career pathways, social wellbeing, quality of life and their family relationships. YC reported having open communication with the YC Team, but often lacked confidence and trust in support services due to previous experiences. Results also showed increased awareness and knowledge of challenges faced by YC could be improved, with school staff often being unaware whether they have YC students, parents not being aware of the effects of their children being YCs, and YCs themselves not understanding they are considered carers. Resources enabling families, community services and schools to be equipped to effectively support YCs are needed.

Interventions carried out by the YC Program team ranged widely depending on the YC's circumstances and needs. Often the YC outcomes achieved were a result of practical supports provided by the YC Program team and facilitation of access to mental health services for the YC. Unfortunately, in many cases the YC's basic immediate needs were not being met when they engaged with the program; resulting in improving YCs quality of life being the priority for the YC Program team.

Recommendations from this evaluation include increasing awareness of YCs and their wellbeing through advocating for YC recognition at the systems level including the WA Parliament and within the WA Department of Education. There is also need for advocacy of YC aged under 14 due to a current lack of appropriate services for this age group. Trauma informed training for YC staff, and additional resourcing allowing staff to be able to service YC in both metropolitan and regional areas and would facilitate staff wellbeing. The Program is meeting its overall aims, but due to the increase in demand in recent years, an immediate injection of resources is required to head off the potential increase in wait times, allow for the support of all YCs, and to prevent YC "falling through the cracks".

INTRODUCTION

Providers of unpaid care contribute significantly to improving the lives of care recipients, as well as to the healthcare sector more widely (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019). Adopting this role is not always a choice, and individuals become unpaid carers for different reasons including family pressures, economic pressures, and unavailability of suitable care (ABS, 2019). Although this provision of care can lead to positive outcomes such as a stronger relationship with the recipient, it can also lead to various negative outcomes for the carer.

Providing unpaid care can be detrimental to the physical, psychological, and financial wellbeing of the carer, with the importance of supporting carers being widely acknowledged (Broady & Aggar, 2017; Hill & Broady, 2019). Young carers specifically appear to face additional challenges as primary caregivers such as difficulty focusing on their education, difficulty forming and maintaining social connections, and difficulty securing and maintaining employment (Addo et al., 2024; Brimblecombe et al., 2020; Stephanou, 2023).

According to recent estimates, there are over 391,000 carers under the age of 25 in Australia, a substantial rise from 235,000 in 2018 (ABS, 2024). Data from the same year showed that although most young carers were not primary carers¹, a substantial 17,000 were (ABS, 2024). This data showed that where young people aged 15-24 were primary carers, they most often were caring for their parents (58% of the time). Young carers under age 25 can be eligible for financial support from the government; as of March 2024, less than 2% were receiving the Carer Payment or Carer Allowance (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2024).

Recognition of the role of young carers has increased in recent years, as has the need for services suited to young carers in Western Australia (McDougall et al., 2018). Given that a large number of unpaid carers are aged 15-24 and face additional challenges to carers in older age groups, specific services are required to support this cohort.

YOUNG CARERS PROGRAM

When a family member is not able to support themselves, caring responsibilities often fall upon another family member, and quite often a child. A 'young carer' is a person under the age of 25 who helps support a member of their household experiencing a mental health challenge, disability, long-term health condition, substance dependency, or who is frail aged (Carers WA, 2024). These responsibilities can significantly hinder young people's ability to pursue education and training, ultimately impacting their career development, as well as their social development, mental health and wellbeing.

Brief Summary

Carers WA's Young Carers Program was developed to provide youth-centric carer supports in Western Australia. This unique service focuses on improving the social and emotional wellbeing of young people who support a family member living with disability, mental health challenges, chronic health conditions or terminal illness, substance dependency or who is frail due to age.

In addition to accessing services offered by Carer Gateway (an adult-centric service), clients of the Young Carers Program can receive a youth needs assessment and peer support in schools.

¹ Primary carer was defined as the person who provides the most informal assistance to a person with a disability for the core activities of mobility, self-care and communication

Recognising the impact that being a carer can have on individuals, the Australian Federal Government announced an additional \$84.3 million to increase carer supports (DSS, 2020). Up to a quarter of these funds were reserved to support young carers in continuing education and/or employment, with support workers being designated to support young carers nationally. Carers WA are the lead agency in delivering the national Carer Gateway program in WA.

In responding to this need, Carers WA developed the Young Carers (YC) program. Youth education, employment, and transition points were identified as key focus areas when creating this program. The YC Program was designed to support the 40,000 young people in WA who support a family member with a disability and/or health challenge (Young Carers, 2024).

Currently, the YC Program service offering consists of; (1) a youth needs assessment, (2) awareness raising, (3) peer support in schools and (4) Carer Gateway services which include a Carer Star assessment, coaching, peer support, and career assessment and planning.

The YC Program aims to enhance the overall quality of life for young carers in WA, contribute to a stronger community understanding, acknowledgement and action toward challenges faced by young carers, and contribute to system-level changes (transparency in policy development, stakeholder commitment to the program, and development of a replicable model of support). These supports were intended to be early intervention; however, the complex nature of referrals made it clear that often they would be in response to existing challenges.

Program model and aims

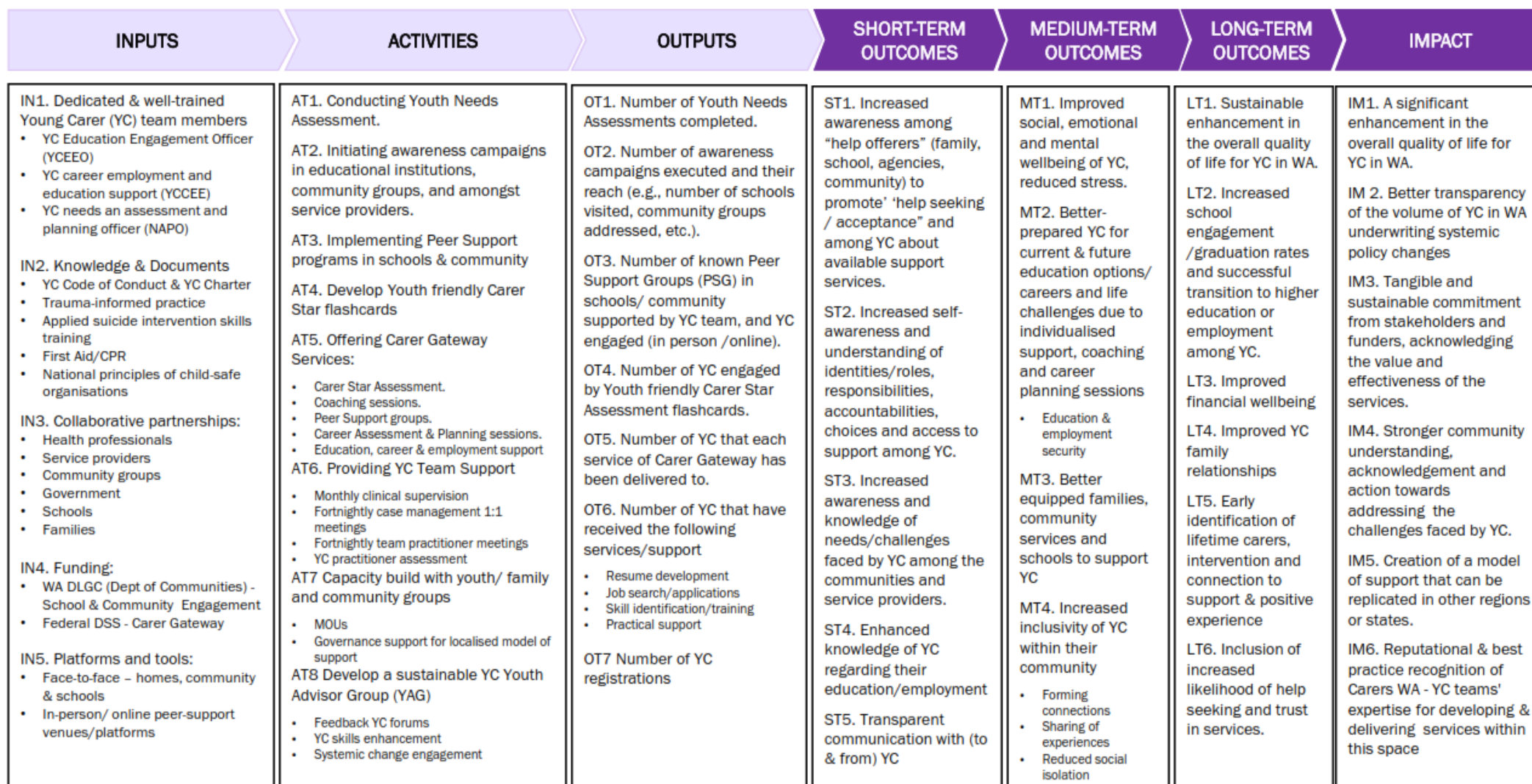
Carers WA's YC Program was founded to design and implement youth-centric supports suited to the needs of young people in WA, based on the principles of Carer Gateway. Guidelines used to inform Carers WA's YC Program were provided for services based on three years' worth of piloting and designing programs in the Eastern states of Australia.

Carers WA's YC Program aims to achieve:

- Significant enhancement in the overall quality of life for young people who care for others in WA.
- Better transparency of the volume of young people who care for others in WA underwriting systemic policy changes.
- Tangible and sustainable commitment from stakeholders and funders, acknowledging the value and effectiveness of the services.
- Stronger community understanding, acknowledgement and action towards addressing the challenges faced by young people who care for others.
- Creation of a model of support that can be replicated in other regions or states.
- Reputational & best practice recognition of Carers WA - YC teams' expertise for developing & delivering services within this space.

YC Program activities were carried out to achieve both client-level and system-level outcomes (See Figure 1, Program Logic).

Figure 1 Young Carers Program Logic



EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods impact evaluation was completed to assess the extent to which the provision of YC Program activities and services improve outcomes in the short, medium, and longer terms. All evaluation tools were co-designed and reviewed with Carers WA. CSI UWA's evaluation process occurred in three stages: identifying the desired outcomes of the YC Program, data collection, and an impact evaluation.

The overall evaluation questions were:

- Does the YC Program assist young people to access suitable support and advice for themselves? If so, how?
- Does the YC Program assist young people to better manage their education and caring responsibilities? If so, how?
- Does the YC Program support the overall wellbeing of young people? If so, how?
- How can the Program be improved?

Ten themes were identified after analysing the available data; increased awareness, increased knowledge of YC roles and responsibilities, increased wellbeing, being prepared and equipped, effective communication, inclusivity, increased quality of life, knowledge of school and career pathways, improved family relationships, and improved confidence in help-seeking.

Demonstrated outcomes included an increased awareness in parents of how to support YCs.

Identifying outcomes

Carers WA's YC Program Logic captured the relations between organisational resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes. This Program Logic was then operationalised to develop a comprehensive outcomes matrix (see Appendix A – Outcomes Matrix), which defined Carers WA's YC Program intended outcomes, the measurable indicators of success for each outcome, and each indicator's data source. This evaluation examined outcomes that refer to changes the program aims to achieve for YCs - such as improved social, emotional and mental wellbeing - as well as outcomes at a school, community service provider and systems level.

Data collection

Ethics

Ethical approval for the Carer WA YC Program evaluation was granted by The University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee in accordance with the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement) and the policies and procedures of The University of Western Australia (2023/ET000926).

Data Sources

The research process involved both novel data collection, as well as analysis of existing Carers WA data. Table 1 gives a brief account of each data source. Qualitative data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis to summarise key issues and experiences identified during interviews.

Qualitative interview selection process

All interviews were conducted by a co-author of this report (LL). For the YC Program team and stakeholders, interviews were carried out with YC Program workers and management, a school chaplain and a school psychologist, student wellbeing personnel, and youth workers.

Table 1: Data Sources

Administrative Data	Administrative data were provided by Carers WA. We requested and received data which showed various data exports concerning administrative and client data, such as client demographics and output data including the number of times which services were delivered.
Interviews (CSI)	Interviews were conducted with YC team members, Carers WA management staff, and other stakeholders involved with YCs activities and programs. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analyses were conducted and contextualised quantitative findings. Extracts from these analyses have been used throughout this report, with this qualitative material forming a crucial part in understanding the experiences of YCs.
Surveys (CSI)	Online surveys for YC were distributed through Carers WA staff. YCs were asked: demographic questions; about their awareness and understanding of their identity/role, responsibilities and choices; experiences of education/career options and planning, communication from Carers WA; social, emotional and mental wellbeing, quality of life; and support from Carers WA.
Case Studies (Carers WA)	Carers WA provided the case studies of YC which have been used throughout the report. These case studies have illustrated the activities of the YC Program and their impact on young people who care for others.
Radio Interview (Existing, 6PR Radio)	One existing, publicly available recording of a radio interview with a young person who cares for a sibling was accessed. This interview gave insight into the experiences of the young carer, as well as their experiences with Carers WA's YC Program.

PROGRAM OUTPUTS

Program output data was available for five of the seven identified outputs. The below description of these outputs refer to the period June 2020 - May 2024.

- 2,973 registrations to the YC Program were completed. These registrations can be completed online by the young carer themselves, or on behalf of a young carer.
- 2,503 Youth Needs Assessments were completed. These assessments are conversations between YC team members and clients to help determine the nature and extent of the care they provide, how providing this care affects them, and what supports they have and/or require. Youth Needs Assessments are seen as an essential first step in providing support, and have been conducted as part of the YC Program since its inception.
- 35 schools and 48 community groups were reached by Carers WA awareness campaigns. These campaigns were carried out to increase awareness of young carers' experiences and needs, as well as how to identify young carers, in accordance with the Carers WA policy submission which highlighted this need (Carers WA, 2021).
- Part of the YC Program service offering is access to Carer Gateway services. Of these, carer support planning was accessed most often (546 times), followed by carer-directed support packages (339 times), and counselling (134 times). Carer coaching was accessed less often (39 times), and emergency respite was accessed the least (4 times).

- Various other supports were offered as part of the YC Program. Of these, practical supports were accessed the most often (215 times), followed by resume development support (52 times), skill identification training/support (38 times), and support for job searching/applications (28 times).
- Data was not available to show how many peer support groups in schools were supported by the YC team, or for how many young carers engaged in these groups, as this data was recorded by schools.
- Data was not available to show how many young carers were engaged by Youth Carer Star Assessment flashcards.
- The YC Bursary, a one-off payment of \$3,768 was provided to a number of YC's by Carers Australia.

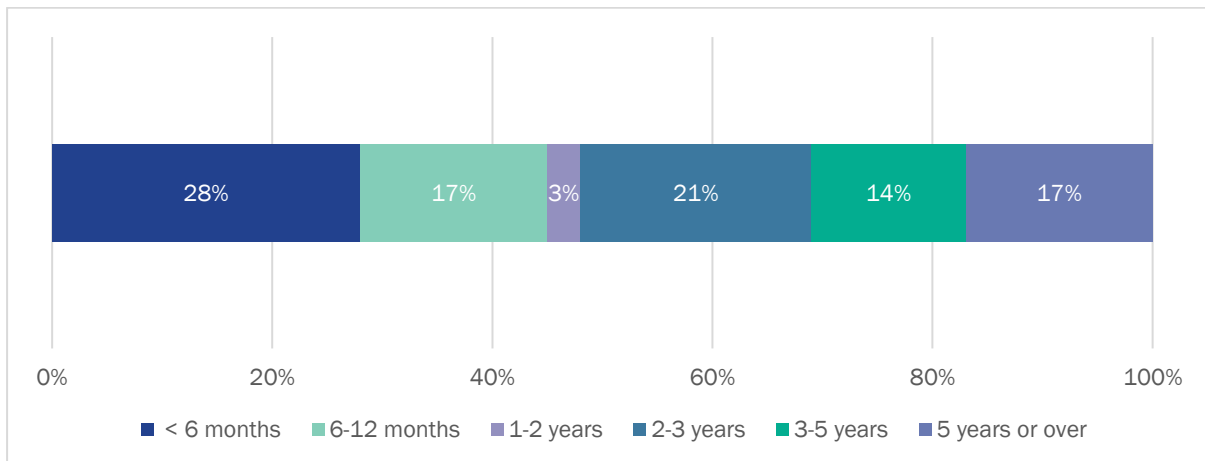
RESULTS

The following section provides a demographic overview of young carers involved in the evaluation, program outputs, and expected short-, medium-, and long-term program outcomes.

Profile of Young Carer Survey Respondents

An online survey was sent out through the Carers WA network to be completed by YCs. Fifty-one people responded to the survey, 78% female, and 73% aged between 9 and 25 years. On average, survey respondents had spent 4.6 years caring for others. The majority of respondents are studying – 41% at school, 7% at TAFE, and 7% at university, while 35% are working. Almost half (48%) have been receiving support from Carers WA for under two years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Length of time receiving support from Carers WA



Evaluation of Outcomes

The YC Program aims to support young people who care for others, families, and communities to improve the overall quality of life for YC in WA. Figure 3 summarises the themes that were identified during the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data. The strengths of the YC Program have been reported under each of the ten major themes along with recommendations for the YC Program moving forward.

Figure 3: Themes identified during surveys, interviews and case studies with YCs, YC Program team members, and stakeholders



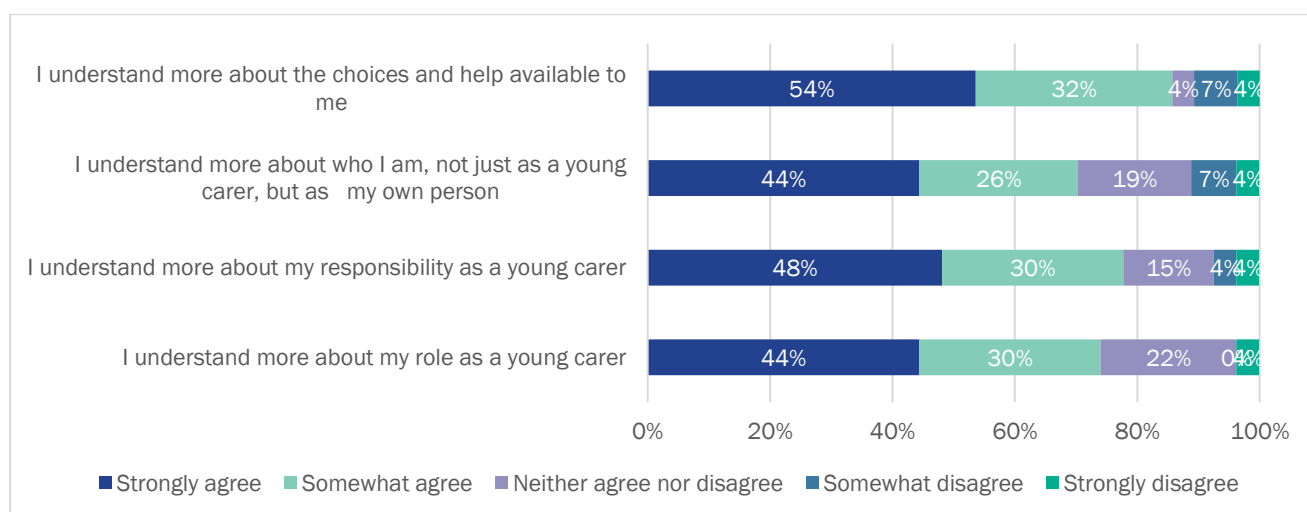
Awareness

Carers WA aims to increase awareness about the YC Program and available support services amongst YCs, families, schools, agencies, and the community. The online survey and interview discussions ranged from increased self-awareness of young carers to increased awareness of available support services for YCs.

Young Carers' self-awareness

Through the YC Program, the majority of young carers report increased understanding about the choices and help available to them (86%), increased understanding of who they are as a person not just as a YC (70%), and increased understanding about their responsibilities (78%) and role (74%) as a YC (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Increases in Young Carer's awareness and understanding



Awareness of support services

YC team members worked with YCs, introducing them to counselling and community services, thus mitigating issues with isolation, and raising awareness of sources of support among YC.

“We do link most young people we work with into counselling services and also getting them linked into community, going from a lot of them experience significant isolation.” (YC Team)

Schools have demonstrated varied awareness of the issues faced by YC, with some schools providing referrals to Carers WA, and others refuting the presence of YCs in their schools, despite evidence showing high prevalence rates of 1 in 4 young people. Despite efforts by YC health promotion officers to raise awareness, many schools do not consider YC issues a priority, focusing instead on other pressing issues, such as family domestic violence (FDV). However, FDV and YC issues often go *“hand in hand”*, thus an integrated approach to addressing FDV and YC issues may not only be feasible, but more effective.

“We've received referrals and it's also been really useful for the staff in the schools to be able to identify young carers because you'd be surprised by the number of schools who have said, ‘oh no, no, we don't have young carers in our school.’” (YC Team)

Knowledge

Carers WA aims to increase knowledge about the challenges faced by YC and also enhance the knowledge of YC regarding their education and employment. Stakeholder interviews showed that this area still needs attention; the role and prevalence of YCs is not well understood by schools and the wider public. The negative impacts of being a YC are well documented, often manifesting in schools as tiredness, agitation and difficulty focusing. Interview participants explained that generally schools misinterpret these impacts as behavioural issues rather than the effects of being a YC.

“There are actually a lot of young people in the schools that are young carers. It's just [schools don't know] the signs to look out for.” (YC Team)

“There is a complete misunderstanding from schools. I'm finding, for example, like a lot of the young people will turn up late, they're tired, they all display different kind of things. There is a lot of disengagement from school, low attendance rate, grades dropping. I worked with one girl who got into the soccer team, which was like a great achievement for her, despite having a caring role for her mum and two siblings. She said that she's been told she can't attend because she'd arrived for training a few minutes

late three times in a row. So they kicked her off the team. But no one had actually cared to check why she was late. It's extremely punitive.” (YC Team)

The issue of sharing information about who is a YC within schools was raised, with one interview participant stating that educators can better support their students when they know some of their situation.

“I think it does get really tricky if the primary educators are not able to have that information...they get these emails out and they'll say, oh, look, [student] is managing something at the moment please be aware they might not be acting as normal. And that's great, but they don't actually know the student is a YC. It's really disempowering for teachers and they are probably the ones that would be more likely to deliver that care as well.” (School Staff)

This lack of knowledge could partly stem from YCs often not identifying as carers, and hence not disclosing their caring responsibilities to others that could assist them (i.e., school staff, friends or other family). YCs often see their caring role as normal, and a family duty, without recognising the strain it places on them and their development.

“One of the big pieces is a lot of young people don't realise they are in that caring role and they don't see themselves as being in that caring role. And I think it's quite eye opening for them when it is explained to them, you know, your life is a little bit different and you need support.” (Stakeholder)

Communication

Carers WA aims to promote transparent communication between YC and the YC team. While only 1 in 4 (39%) YCs report Carers WA team members understand them, 2 in 3 (67%) report they are comfortable asking for help or advice from someone at Carers WA if they need it, and 1 in 2 (51%) report it easy to tell Carers WA what they think. The majority of YCs (65%) report it is easy to understand the information given to them by YC team.

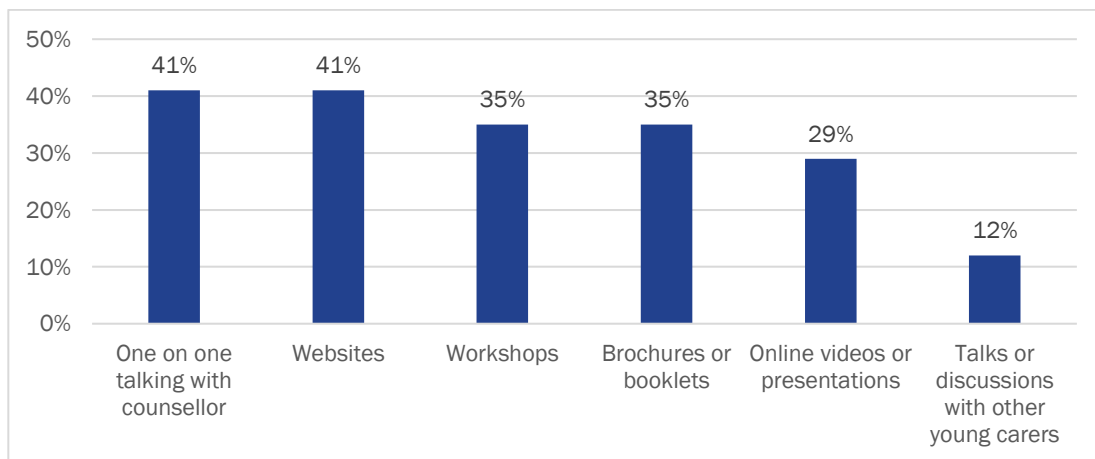
“When I have my meeting we talk about lots of things. Mum and Dad read the emails to me.” (YC)

“It is all laid out simply and easily comprehended with little room for misunderstanding.” (YC)

“Just knowing someone might actually listen when we want to talk.” (YC)

YC report they would prefer to receive information from the YC team via one-on-one talking with a counsellor or via websites (Figure 5). While 25% of YC report they don't know how often they get news or updates from Carers WA, 21% report getting news or updates monthly, 11% weekly, 14% several times a year, and 14% never. YC report their preferred way of communicating with Carers WA is via email (33%), followed by text (17%).

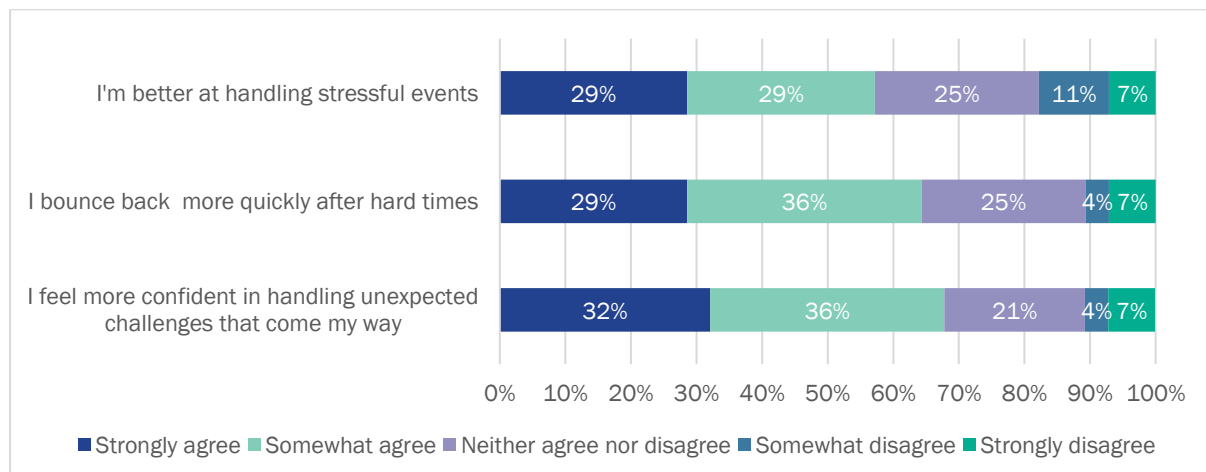
Figure 5. Young Carer's preferred ways of communication



Wellbeing

YC report after support from Carers WA they have increased resilience: they are better at handling stressful events (58%), bounce back quickly after hard times (65%), and feel more confident in handling unexpected challenges (68%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Young Carer's Wellbeing and Stress



The importance of adequate supports to the social, emotional, and mental wellbeing of YCs was highlighted by YC team members and stakeholders. One stakeholder described the transformation of a YC after being involved in the YC Program as going from a “very small pond...just trying to keep her head above water” to “being out in the ocean, facing challenges that only make her better and stronger.”

Unfortunately, many mental health support services have high fees, long waiting lists, and/or inadequate interventions. YC team members identified a deprivation in resources and services, with Carers WA facilities not being child-friendly, despite being one of the only organisations able to support YCs who are often turned away from other services. The Carer's WA counselling team only accepts clients over the age of fourteen, leaving children under that age unable to receive appropriate care. The only options for children aged under fourteen are the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Youth Focus, both of which are known to have strict acceptance criteria.

“I think 13 upwards, there are services out there, but as we know, long wait lists and very short interventions. We found a really good partnership was Helping Minds. They're in the same office. We've got really, really good feedback from them.” (YC Team)

“Another issue that I've noticed is we really are the only organisation that can support young carers or recognise young carers, like a lot of young people are turned away from other services like CAMHS for their mental health if they're waiting on an ADHD or autism diagnosis. They don't have other supports. We have a counselling team within our organisation but they only accept 14 years plus because we're not a child-friendly organisation as in the building itself. So that also has posed issues for us because the alternatives are CAMHS or Youth Focus and sometimes depending on criteria they don't accept them and a lot of those organisations are age 12 plus as well.” (YC Team)

The consequence of a lack of support is that stress becomes the norm for YCs; not having money, a school uniform, food, and even a bed becomes normalised. It follows then that their education becomes a second priority.

“A lot of young carers don't see that they're a young carer. They kind of believe that that's the norm and that, well, I'm just helping, I'm just being a brother, I'm just being a sister, a daughter... some of the young people we work with don't even have bedding, don't have a bed, don't have their own room, which is difficult for them and it's not a surprise then that they're not attending school or that they don't have enough supports in place.” (YC Team)

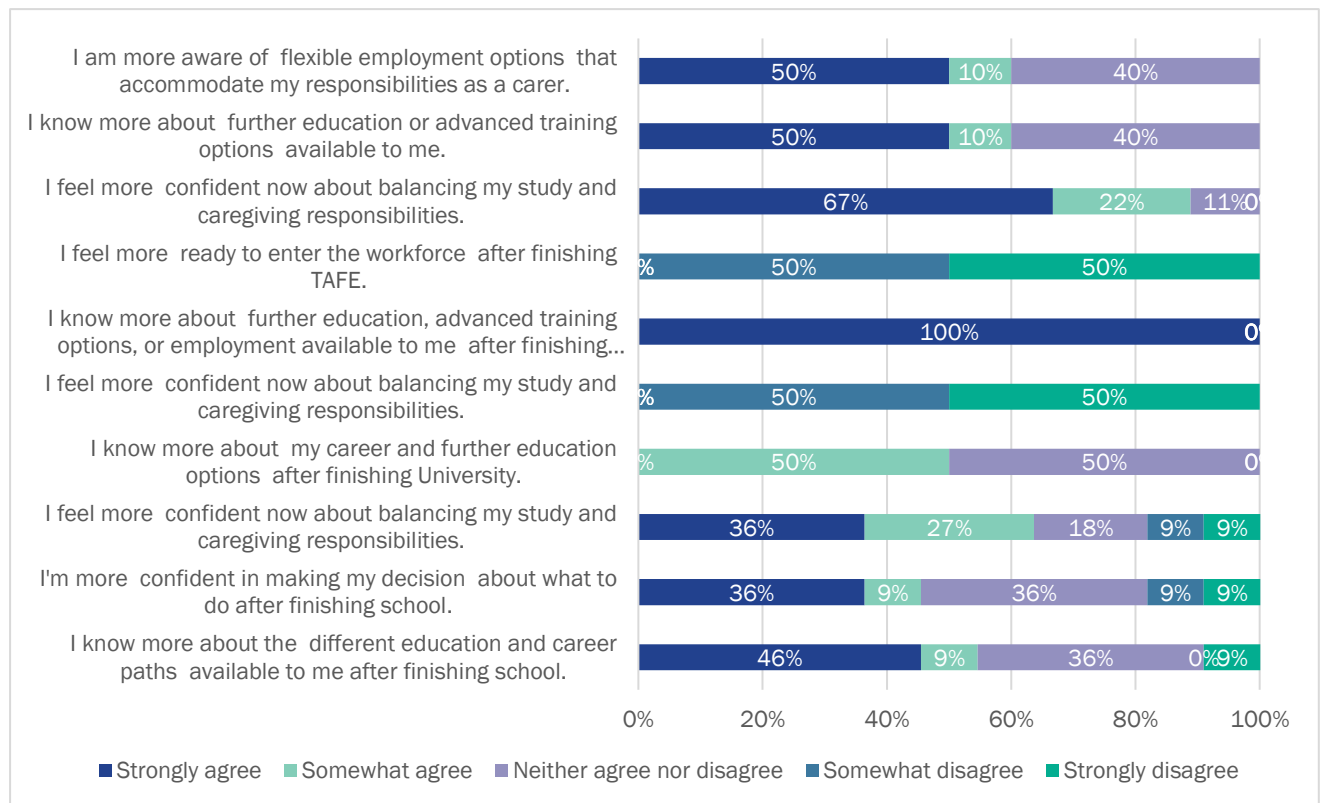
School and career pathways

YC team members have undergone training to become career coaches for young people, which has been identified as a “*really valuable skill set*”. Career coaches have helped YCs with job applications, resumes, or just provided some general direction for those that seem “*lost as to what they want to do in the future or with their life currently*”. Ultimately, career coaching provides YCs with agency, enabling them to decide their future. YC team members also felt well supported to carry out their career coaching work.

“Young Carers can be a bit lost as to like what they want to do in the future or even with life currently. We've recently had training to become life and career coaches for young people, so I think that's a really valuable skill set that we have now.” (YC Team)

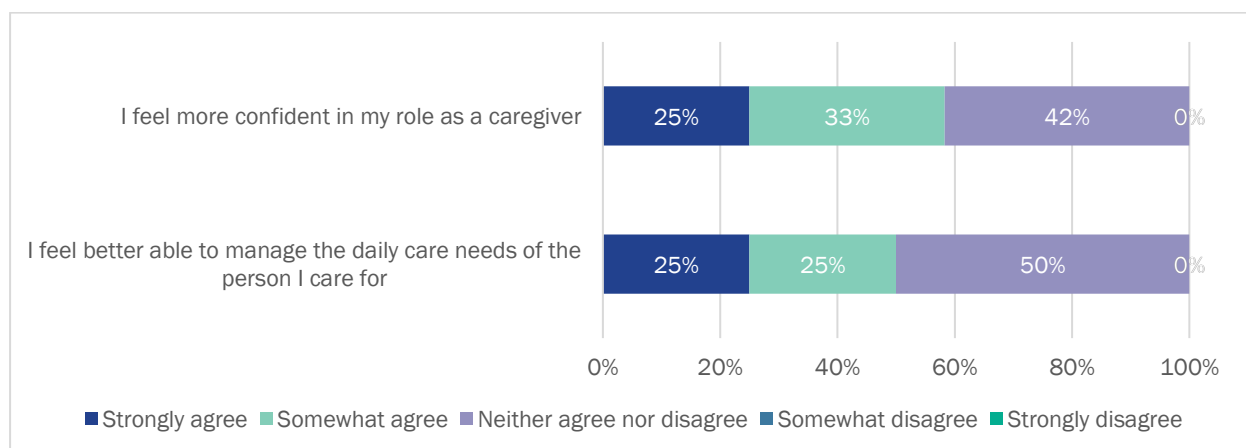
The success of the career coaching is reflected in YC reporting increased awareness, confidence and knowledge about their education and career pathways (Figure 7). While 37% of YCs report not needing any additional information concerning education and career pathways, 26% would like more information around university or tertiary education, 26% around vocational or TAFE education, 26% around apprenticeships or internships, 33% around getting a job, and 4% around a gap year.

Figure 7. Young Carer's awareness, confidence, knowledge around education and career pathways



After being involved in the YC Program, YCs report being better equipped in the caregiving role (58%) and being able to manage the needs of the person they care for (50%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Young Carer's awareness, confidence, knowledge around education and career pathways



The case study below describes how the support by YC team members led to a range of positive outcomes for both a young carer and her mother, including increased school attendance. The YC went from not attending school regularly to being transitioned back into suitable education, regular attendance, and engagement with their studies. This case study also speaks to the themes of wellbeing, improved family relationships, and improved quality of life.

Case Study

A 14-year-old young person (YC) who cares for her mother, who has both chronic health conditions and mental health concerns. Initially, the YC's family situation was experiencing serious functional issues including her father being absent due to domestic violence, and her mother exerting coercive control. The YC accessed support from Young Carers over a six-month period to deliver a multi-faceted intervention. In this case, it was necessary to support the mother in order to relieve the burden on the YC. Young Carers team worked with the YC's mother so she would allow her daughter to wear appropriate clothing and engage in social activities. They also assisted the mother in seeking mental health care for herself and utilise her existing NDIS funding. These interventions indirectly sought to reduce burden on the YC. The Young Carer team supported the YC directly by (1) providing mental health support and resources, (2) by assisting her to return to school, (3) by helping her identify her interests and hobbies, (4) by providing practical supports (gym equipment and fidget toys), and (5) by facilitating opportunities for her to expand her social network and to engage in activities beyond her caring role. These interventions led to improved family dynamics, enhanced social engagement for the YP, educational progress for the YC, mental health improvement for both the YC and her mother, and the mother becoming less manipulative.

Prepared and equipped

Carers WA aims to better equip families, community services and schools to support YCs. Currently, community services and schools are not well equipped to support YCs struggling with severe mental health issues. Logistics is a major issue, with long wait lists for free counselling, or it being too far away from where the YC lives. As discussed above in [YC Wellbeing](#), some YCs also don't meet CAMHS criteria for admission and may not be old enough to access services.

YC team members commented that they were not qualified to provide mental health support to YCs in need of a "chat", which is a hard thing to tell an isolated young person seeking support and connection. They communicated the fact that, unlike case managers, they don't check on every aspect of the YCs' lives, with their job limited to setting up YCs for independence. There is a need for extra mental health support for YCs.

"It's a bit tricky because we're not actually like case managers, so we don't like check in on you every day and every aspect of your life. But when we've met all the goals and our job is closed, we've set them up to be independent enough to move forward. A lot of them are like, 'oh, can you just come and have a chat to me?' And that's when I think the mental health thing comes in as well, because they want to have someone to talk to, but they don't have that person. And we're not that person to do that. And a lot of times we have to tell them, unfortunately, I'm not a qualified counsellor or a psychologist, so I can't actually just come out and have a chat to you." (YC Team)

Disclosure of being a YC was identified as a barrier to being able to provide support. Participants described that often teachers or school staff aren't aware that their student is a YC, and hence cannot offer them the appropriate supports.

"[My teacher] knew that I needed someone to talk to, that I needed some support and being introduced to young carers was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I don't think I would be where I am right now in my caring role without Young Carers." (YC)

"It sounds silly, but once you're aware of it [young people acting as carers], it can be relatively straightforward to get supports into place." (Stakeholder)

Inclusivity

Participants described the social impacts that being a YC can have which included not having the opportunity to spend time with other kids in a care-free environment. Carers WA run peer support groups and free events and activities for YCs to provide these opportunities to socialise with others their age without the worry of providing care, as well as to foster inclusivity in their communities. These peer support groups have been trialled online and in-person, although engagement has not been as high as expected. It was suggested that the online delivery was not appealing enough, whilst travelling to the in-person delivery was a key factor for low attendance.

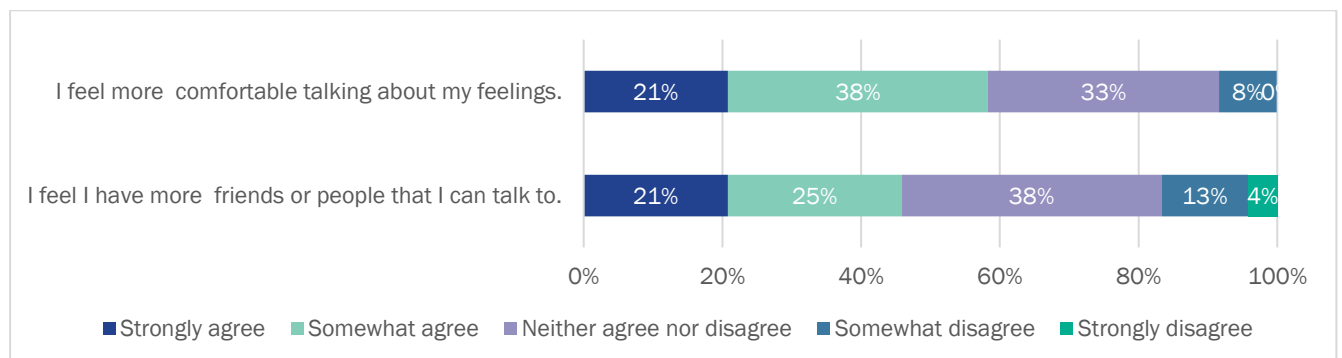
Increased inclusivity of YCs could be achieved with transport support, which would help to facilitate in-person peer support groups. Transport is a major barrier to the establishment of the support group, which runs 4pm to 5pm in the evening. Some YCs have prior commitments such as work and school, further complicating their attendance in the peer support group.

On a positive note, despite low engagement with Carers WA peer support groups, participants mostly indicated that they had some peer support.

“When it does come to caring for my brother, I do have those times where I cannot hang out with my friends and I can't have time for myself because I cook dinners regularly, I help him with homework, I help him throughout the day. So, I don't have those times where I can be with myself or be with my friends. My friends are very supportive when it comes to me caring for my brother. They do understand, communication with them and seeing them is very easy because they understand that I won't have that much time on my hands to hang out with them because I care for [my brother]”. (YC)

This was reflected in the above quote and survey responses which indicated since being involved with Carers WA, 45% of YCs report they have more friends or people they can talk to and 58% report they are more comfortable talking to others about their feelings (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Young Carer's awareness, confidence, knowledge around education and career pathways



Young Carers' quality of life

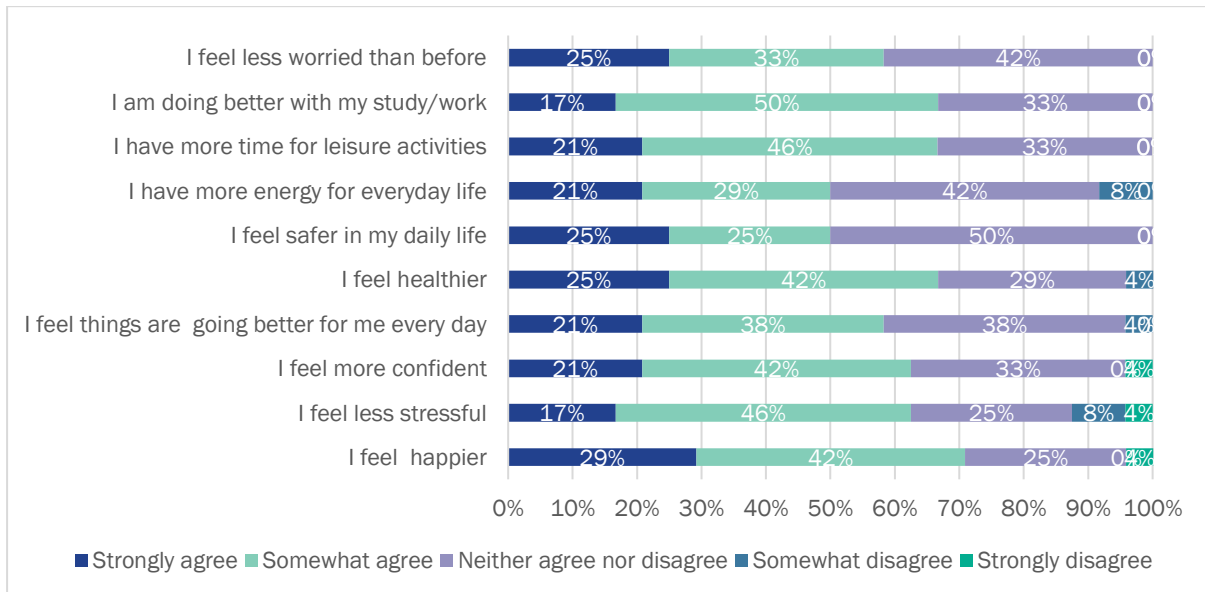
Unfortunately, interviewees often described a relatively poor quality of life for YCs when they first engaged with the YC Program. For many YCs, their basic needs were not being met. Carers WA team members described instances where they intended to support the YC with their education or social life, but instead had to address their living conditions and mental health needs. Only once these basic needs were met was the YC Program able to support the YC in their caring duties, education, and social life.

“A lot of the young carers that we meet are probably facing some immediate needs that are not being met. Even before we talk about going back to school or trying to look for a job, we need to address immediate needs that are not being met. A lot of the basic needs are because of the financial situation at home, like I don't have a proper bed to sleep in, or I'm cold at night because I haven't got a blanket.” (YC Team)

“I feel like once those basic needs have been met and linking to mental health support, then after that we can really get them to find joy again in the things that they used to be interested in or wanting to try. We obviously focus on those immediate needs but I also think there’s a high emphasis on their mental health and physical wellbeing because a lot of them haven’t done exercise in a long time.” (YC Team)

YC team members act to improve the quality of life of YCs through the interventions they provide, which often involve helping them access mental health support as a priority. YCs report since being involved with the YC Program, they have increased quality of life, feeling less worried, safer, healthier, happier, confident, having more energy and more time for leisure activities (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Young Carer’s quality of life



The below case study illustrates how the YC team’s actions improved the quality of life for the YC, as well as for other members of their family. Collaboration between Carers WA and other services is crucial in achieving sustainable and positive outcomes.

Case Study

Young carers often face the challenge of managing their own health concerns while providing care for family members. In some cases, the severity of their health issues and the collective health challenges within the family can create ethical dilemmas regarding appropriate interventions. Mother is bed-bound with a spinal injury and substance misuse issues, YC 1 (aged 15) has been diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and YC 2 (aged 13) has been diagnosed with Autism and intellectual disability. The family lives in a poor condition with black mould and rat infestation. Basic needs such as hygiene, food security, and proper housing are not being met. The mother and the youngest child have not left the house for weeks, and there is a severe lack of adequate food and sanitary conditions. The children are primarily responsible for care tasks such as microwaving food and assisting their mother with toileting and mobility needs. The children do not have the capacity to benefit from the services available through the YC Program until the more pressing issues of housing, hygiene, and food insecurity are addressed.

Intervention included: immediate safety and hygiene (referral to Child Protection services, arrangement of professional services to eradicate mould and rats); addressing basic needs (coordination with local food banks, and providing resources and support to improve home hygiene practices); health and wellbeing (ensuring appropriate medical care and mental health and substance misuse support services; social and educational support (school reintegration);

and long-term support (connecting family with a Family Support Network and offering parent education and support).

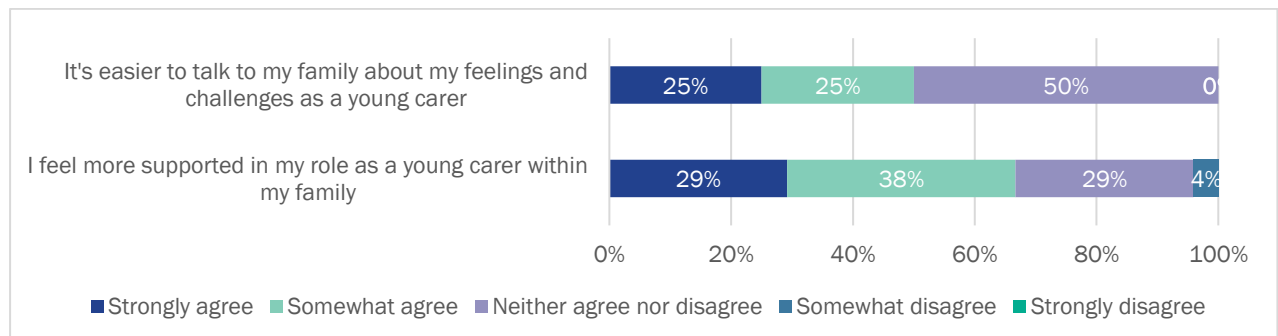
Young Carers' family relationships

Many YCs do not view themselves as carers, as discussed previously, but view themselves as a sibling or a child of a family member who needs their help. Regardless, the caring roles that YCs have can strain family relationships, an area that YCs often need support in navigating. The caring relationship can disrupt traditional family roles, such as YCs adopting parent-like roles for siblings. One participant explained that support in clarifying caring roles can be protective for the YC. YCs report since being involved with the YC Program they are able to express their feelings and needs to their family (50%) and feel more supported in their role within their family (67%) (Figure 11).

"When you approach these young people and say, 'are you a young carer?' The young carer would say, 'sorry, what?' because they're not. They're a child of somebody with a disability and so that relationship, it's not a care role, it's not an occupation, it's a loved one providing the care that the other loved one needs." (YC Team)

"If you can help a young person understand truly who they are and understand the cards that they have been dealt are difficult and challenging and completely outside of their circle of control, you empower them to make better decisions. If we don't respond at a very young age, they are often the people that become entrenched unfortunately into long-time caring roles or who can easily fall into domestic violence relationships because they haven't learned how to set healthy boundaries to protect themselves. So it's cycle-breaking in that sense." (YC Team)

Figure 11. Young Carer's family relationships



Supporting YCs can also require supporting the care recipient, which is most often a parent or sibling. The below case study describes how the YC team supported a parent who was being cared for by their child and helped to improve the relationship between them. This case study also shows the complexity of cases that the YC team deal with and demonstrates the need for multi-faceted interventions in supporting some YCs.

Case Study

A four-year-old child (YC) was observed feeding and comforting her younger brother with a disability. The YC caregiving activities went beyond typical sibling interactions, leading to early signs of parentification. She displayed signs of stress and had difficulty engaging in age-appropriate play and activities. The YC Team worked with her parents to educate them on the impacts of early parentification. They provided resources to help the parents distribute caregiving tasks more evenly and encouraged them to use external support services. The YC parents began to access additional support for their other child, reducing the caring burden on the YC. The YC received support to engage in play and social activities appropriate for her age. Her stress levels decreased, and she began to show improvements in her emotional well-being.

Young Carers' help-seeking and trust in services

The lack of appropriate services for YCs was highlighted by participants, particularly for mental health support. As such, YCs were described as being unsure about the YC Program and whether it could actually help them. Those YCs that had been disappointed previously by other services were described as having less trust and hence engaging in less help-seeking from services. Trust can also be broken when YC team members give hope and then don't, or can't, deliver on their promises (based on factors such as transport, location and availability).

"I think the main reason why we serve the older group is because we know that there's at least potential that they can bring themselves to things. Whereas if we're trying to meet an eight-year-old, if the parent doesn't come to the party, it's really hard to deliver that service. And sometimes we find that you're doing more harm than good because you give them hope that we're like, oh, we can do this and you can do that. But then we can't actually deliver because your mum can't take you to the place." (YC Team)

"Things like trying to do artist activities which so many kids get to do is so hard for them because no one can drive them or take them. They're too young to drive themselves. Sometimes they don't have bikes or scooters or live too far, so they miss out on a lot of those things that lots of kids do." (YC Team)

As with a lack of engagement in peer groups, transport issues acted as a barrier for YCs accessing support/seeking help. Interviewees described how most YCs rely on parents to drive them so they can access supports, and if parents were not interested, they could not access them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Advocate for the WA Carers Charter to recognise YCs.

Currently, the WA Carers charter within the Act Carers Recognition Act 2004, does not recognise the unique experiences and needs of Young Carers, and hence does not comment on the need for youth-specific support. As a guiding document in the provision of support for carers, the WA Carers Charter could be foundational in ensuring better awareness and support of YCs. An amended charter, including the 2023 Young Carers Charter, could ultimately inspire systemic change toward supporting YCs within WA. Charters from other Australian states could also be used as inspiration, specifically Queensland and South Australia, which lead the way in considering YCs in their Carer Charters.

Recommendation 2: Advocate for the WA Department of Education to have a YC Identification and Support Policy.

Awareness of the prevalence, experiences, and needs of YCs appears to vary widely. While the Carers WA website has a [Young Careers Support Toolkit](#) and resources for parents, schools and organisations, interview participants report many schools have insufficient awareness of how to identify, understand and support YCs. The Victorian Department of Education has a policy setting out requirements for schools and education providers to [identify Young Carers and ensure they are supported](#). The Victorian policy includes: links to support services; the roles of schools in identification, response and support; and fact sheets and learning modules for teachers.

Recommendation 3: Advocate for adequate services suitable to under 14s.

Consistency is needed between what Carers WA define as a YC and who the YC team are resourced to support. YCs aged 8 – 25 are supported through Carer Gateway and Assessment Planning, however, YC team members suggest that they are only able to provide what they consider to be adequate support to young people aged over 14.

Multiple interviews with YC team members identified a critical need for a strategy to target YC 8 - 12 years, who are currently underserved due to inadequate adult or guardian support. Short, one-off respites such as an annual camp was considered to be insufficient support, with mental health services and peer support events required to assist with this younger age group. A separate strategy also needs to be developed to support YCs under the age of 8 due to the lack of resources to provide a one-on-one intensive family caseworker.

“[We are told] 8 to 25 is the age of YCs. That is just a made-up number that someone came up with somewhere. They are very much younger than that. Some YCs are as young as three years of age. And you think, how is that possible? But you go to families where you're watching three-year-olds feed infant children. You can witness it, okay, the mum isn't well. I've just watched a toddler go and get a snack or a jar of baby food and sit and feed them. Tell me how they are not caring. We've seen it, we've witnessed it, and we can't respond to that with the scope of the program that we have. So the future is actually, what do we do to address that?” (YC Team)

Recommendation 4: Supporting the wellbeing of YC team members

Trauma-informed training was considered to be essential for all YC staff. Trauma histories of YC clients and their families are not available to the YC team when they provide support; past traumatic experiences could affect how clients and their families react to the YC team, and their presence could potentially be viewed as intrusive and unwelcome. Trauma-informed training would prepare YC staff to better support YCs and families assisting staff in dealing with and de-escalating situations with aggressive parents, who have often experienced trauma themselves. The training would help staff manage challenging conversations, as well as set boundaries and expectations on deliverables.

“For anyone working in this sector, you probably want family violence training, as it goes hand in hand. I've met a lot of parents who are care recipients because of family violence, so either from physical assault or the ongoing emotional abuse that they've experienced, they end up with significant mental health challenges.” (YC Team)

Recommendation 5: Additional staff resourcing

It appears the demand for the YC Program exceeds the capacity that YC team have to deliver. The program received an ‘*influx of complex referrals*’ from schools shortly after the program began. It appears this high demand has been maintained with one stakeholder explaining there were over 100 referrals waiting to be processed, with only four youth needs and planning assessment officers available. One stakeholder suggested that increased staffing could facilitate quicker responses to the initial inquiry and triage. A fast-tracked initial appointment could assuage the anxieties of YCs.

“The only thing was that it took a while for the for the initial appointment. I guess if they had more resources in order to pick clients up quicker, because those young people are always already so nervous about whether or not they actually fit that criteria.” (Stakeholder)

Additional staffing across different locations could reduce the time the YC team spend driving across Perth (which currently takes up a lot of their time), reduce wait times for YCs, and allow localised knowledge to be shared. Ideally, additional staffing could be used to set up regional hubs, as regional areas suffer from a lack of essential service availability. Having YC team members at different locations would also make the YC service more accessible for YC who rely on their parents for transport.

As outlined in the newly released 2022 ABS statistic, YC numbers nationally have increased 65% over 4 years. This is an unprecedented growth curve, which will be hard for any young person-orientated service to manage. To head off a potential increase in wait times and YC “falling through the cracks”, an immediate injection of resources is required.

CONCLUSION

Through the YC Program, Carers WA deliver interventions to support young people who provide unpaid care to a family member or friend living with disability and/or serious illness, referred to as Young Carers (YCs). Program clients can access youth needs assessments and peer supports in schools, in addition to Carer Gateway supports (which are usually available to adults only). The YC Program proved to be effective for YCs in (a) increasing self-awareness, (b) improving wellbeing and quality of life, (c) increasing parents’ awareness, (d) improving family relationships, and (e) increasing school engagement. From a client perspective, the YC Program was at times very influential to their life: *“I don't think I would be where I am right now in my caring role without Young Carers...they've had a huge impact on my caring role and getting the help that I needed.”*

Having been established in response to lack of services for YCs, the YC Program has, and continues to, support YCs with widely varying circumstances and needs. Although intended to be an early-intervention program, the prevalence of unmet basic needs amongst YCs meant that YC Program service provision was often providing basic necessities before assisting the YCs mentally, emotionally, and socially. Despite this unfortunate context, the YC Program has demonstrated positive outcomes, suggesting that it is serving the YC community as intended.

Widespread recognition is needed to support YC within WA. Recommendations arising from this evaluation include increased advocacy of YCs at the systems level including the WA Parliament and Department of Education, increased advocacy for services of YC aged under 14, trauma-informed training for YC staff, and additional resourcing for staff to cover both metropolitan and regional areas of WA.

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APPENDIX A – OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

Evaluation Framework of Young Carers Program - Outputs

OUTPUTS	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
OT1.	Number of Youth Needs Assessments completed.	Quantitative summary of the assessments completed (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
OT2.	Number of schools visited	Quantitative summary of schools/community groups Carers WA reached for awareness campaigns(#) Number of people reached (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
	Number of community groups reached					
OT3.	Number of known Peer Support Groups (PSG) in schools supported by YC team/YC engaged	Quantitative summary of the volume of students (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
	Number of YC engaged in PSG (in-person/online)	Quantitative summary of YC engaged in PSG (in-person/online) (#)				
OT4.	Number of YC engaged by Youth friendly Carer Star Assessment flashcards	Quantitative summary of YC engaged by Youth friendly Carer Star Assessment flashcards (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
OT5.	Number of YC that each service of Carer Gateway has been delivered to	Quantitative summary of YC that each service of Carer Gateway has been delivered to (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
OT6.	Number of YC that have received resume development support	Quantitative summary of the volume of how many YC received the respective support/service (#)	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A
	Number of YC that have received support for job search/applications					
	Number of YC that have received skill identification/ training support					
	Practical support provided to YC	Qualitative summary of practical support provided to YC				
OT7.	Number of YC registrations with Carers WA	Quantitative summary of YC registered with Carers WA for service and support	YC administrative data	Biannually	Carers WA	N/A

Evaluation Framework of Young Carers Program – Short-term Outcomes

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
ST1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness among "help offerers" (family, school, agencies, community) to promote "help seeking/ acceptance" 	<p>Staff/Stakeholders: How would you identify signs that YC might be in need of help or support? Can you list the resources or services available for YC? Are you aware of the various support services available for YC provided by Carers WA? Examples?</p>	Interview	Biannually	CSI UWA	Staff /Stakeholders
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness among YC about available support services 	<p>Staff: Are you aware of the various support services available for YC? Do you understand how these services can help YC?</p>				
ST2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC increased awareness and understanding of identity/role 	<p>How has Carers WA helped you understand your role as a YC better? Can you share how Carers WA has shown you the different supports you can access when you need them? What has Carers WA taught you about helping at home and doing your caring jobs the right way? Since being involved with Carers WA, how has your view on making choices for yourself changed? How confident do you feel in your caring role after receiving support from Carers WA?</p>	Interview/Survey	Biannually	CSI UWA	YC
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC increased awareness and understanding of accountability and responsibility 					
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC increased awareness and understanding of their choices and access to support 					
ST3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities, schools, and service providers' increased awareness and knowledge of needs and challenges faced by YC 	<p>Some question examples: How has your understanding of the challenges YC faces changed due to the awareness campaign of Carers WA? Can you identify specific needs of young carers that you were not aware of before Carers WA's outreach? What actions have you seen in the school/community/organisation that show increased support for YC since Carers WA began its awareness campaigns?</p>	Interview	Biannually	CSI UWA	Schools, community groups, service providers, etc.

Evaluation Framework of Young Carers Program – Short-term Outcomes

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
ST4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC enhanced knowledge regarding their education/employment 	<p>For children (Ages 12-17): What are your thoughts about what you'll do after high school? Are you considering further education, like university or vocational training, or other paths? Has Carers WA helped you understand the different options you have for high school or college? How? Can you share how Carers WA has guided you in planning your future career or education path?</p> <p>For young adults (Ages 18-25): Has Carers WA enhanced your understanding of further education opportunities and career planning in any way? How? What skills or knowledge have you gained from Carers WA that have aided your educational or employment journey? Can you identify any Carers WA resources or programs that have been particularly beneficial in advancing your career or educational goals?</p>	Interview/Survey	Biannually	CSI UWA	YC
ST5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparent communication with (to & from) YC 	<p>For Children's family: How does Carers WA usually communicate with your child? How often do you receive communications or updates relevant to your child's role and needs as a YC? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the clarity and understandability of the communications you receive? How do you feel about this way of communication? Are there any other ways of communication you would prefer?</p> <p>For young adults: How often do you receive information or updates from Carers WA? How well does Carers WA keep you informed about the services and support they offer? When you receive communications from Carers WA, how clear and understandable are the messages? Does Carers WA provide clear instructions on how to access their services and support?</p>	Interview/Survey	Biannually	CSI UWA	YC/Family
		<p>Staff: How often do YC receive communications or updates relevant to their role and needs? How do they usually receive communications or information? How do you ensure that the communication sent to the parents of YC is clear and actionable? What strategies do you use to make sure that important information is understood by parents/YC? Can you describe the process of how feedback from parents/YC is collected and used to improve services?</p>	Interview		CSI UWA	Staff

Evaluation Framework of Young Carers Program – Medium-Term Outcomes

MEDIUM-TERM OUTCOMES	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
MT1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC's perspectives on their social, emotional and mental wellbeing, and stress Carers WA staff's observation of YC's wellbeing and stress 	<p>YC: Have the support and services from Carers WA made you feel happier or more relaxed in any way? Can you share with me how? How have the people at Carers WA helped you when you were feeling sad or worried about something? Have the support and services from Carers WA made you feel less stressed in any way?</p> <p>Staff: Based on your interactions, how have you noticed changes in the young carers' overall mood and stress levels since engaging with Carers WA services? Have you observed young carers demonstrating increased resilience or coping strategies that they attribute to Carers WA's support?</p>	Survey	Annually	CSI UWA	YC
		Interview	YC/Carers WA staff			
MT2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better-prepared YC for current & future education options/ careers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Questions in ST4 How has the support from Carers WA influenced your ability to focus on your schoolwork/training/education/work? What has Carers WA given you or taught you that makes you feel more ready for school/uni/job you want to do when you grow up? 	Survey/Interview	Annually	CSI UWA	YC
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better-prepared YC for life challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How confident do you feel in handling unexpected challenges that come your way?/Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) What extent do you think the support and services you receive from Carers WA prepare you for future life challenges? Likert scale 				
MT3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families', community groups' and schools' perceptions of their ability to support YC 	Qualitative summary of perceived ability to support YC.	Interview	Annually	CSI UWA	Families, community groups and schools
MT4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC perceptions regarding their social connection, sense of belonging, and social interaction within their community 	The Social Connectedness Scale	Interview/Survey	Annually	CSI UWA	YC

Carers WA Evaluation Framework – Long-term Outcomes

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
LT1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustainable enhancement in the overall quality of life for YC in WA. 	<p style="text-align: center;">WHQOL-BREF questionnaire</p> <p>The World Health Organization Quality of Life Brief Version (WHOQOL-BREF) is an abbreviated, 26-item version of the 100-item WHOQOL-100 quality of life measure.</p> <p>The WHOQOL-BREF addresses four quality of life domains: physical health, psychological health, social relationships and environment.</p>	Interview/Survey	Annually	CSI UWA	YC
LT2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graduation rate Qualification attainment Post-secondary enrolment rate Vocational/technical training enrolment Employment rate Higher education acceptance rate Apprenticeship/Internship placement 	<p style="text-align: center;">Quantitative summary of graduation rate, employment rate etc.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">National scales / data health stats tend to only start at 14ys. The Senate Select Committee on Work & Care, 2023 clearly identified a significant gap in YC related data</p>	Administrative data/reports	Annually	CSI UWA	Carers WA
LT3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved financial wellbeing of YC families 	<p>YC family: Can you share any ways in which Carers WA has helped your family manage or improve your financial situation? Has the support from Carers WA reduced any financial stress or worries you or your family had? Can you provide an example?</p>	Interview	Annually	CSI UWA	YC families
LT4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC and YC families' perceptions of improved family relationships 	<p>YC: Have you noticed any changes in how your family gets along with each other since receiving support from Carers WA? Do you feel that your family spent more quality time together because of the support and services of Carers WA? Any example? Do you feel the support from Carers WA has helped your family understand and support your role as a young carer better? Can you describe any Carers WA services or activities that have brought your family closer together?</p> <p>YC family: Same questions as above but revised for parents.</p>	Interview/Survey	Annually	CSI UWA	YC and YC families

Carers WA Evaluation Framework – Long-term Outcomes

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES	INDICATOR	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLE QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE	FREQUENCY	GOVERNANCE	PARTICIPANT
LT5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff's perceptions of early identification of lifetime carers, connecting lifetime carers with more support and services beyond Carers WA 	<p>Staff. Can you describe what a lifetime carer is, how do they differ from other YCs? How does Carers WA identify potential lifetime carers at an early stage? Can you describe the intervention process once a lifetime carer is identified? What challenges do you face when trying to connect lifetime carers with the support they need? What do you think can be done to improve access to these necessary supports and make a positive experience for a carer?</p>	Interview	Annually	CSI UWA	Staff
LT6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YC's increased likelihood of help seeking and trust in services. 	<p>What makes you feel comfortable or confident to ask for help from Carers WA? How much do you trust the information and support you get from Carers WA? Why? Do you think that Carers WA understands what you need as a young carer? Can you explain? Have you ever recommended Carers WA to other young carers? What did you tell them? Are there any services or types of support you wish Carers WA would offer?</p>	Interview/Survey	Annually	CSI UWA	YC



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