

TALK TO US

OFF  
THE **RECORD**

# Young Carers' voices

Insight into the experiences of  
Young Carers during the initial  
phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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# Introduction

The Young Carers Service (YCS) in Croydon works to support young people who live in Croydon and have a caring role within their home. They support Young Carers aged 7-26 years old who provide their family with emotional or practical support including shopping, cooking or money management, all of which can have an impact on their own health and wellbeing, social life or education.

Everyone was hit by the impact of a global pandemic and lockdown restrictions in March 2020, but the impact on individual Young Carers and their families was unknown at the time. Young Carers were immediately classified by the government within the five vulnerable groups who should still be able to attend school, but in reality, this felt risky to young people who were trying to protect their family members from Covid-19.

The work of the YCS changed drastically within just one week. Checking in with Young Carers and Young Adult Carers directly to see how they were, and signposting them to other support as needed became the priority.

Reflecting back on that time, it is important that those conversations and their information are not lost, and that instead they are used to help all of us understand the spaces Young Carers were in at the time and the context that surrounded them. This report just touches on the impact of the pandemic, and will help us shape support for this group of young people and their families in the future. It also gives us an opportunity to thank the Young Carers Service team and their Off the Record colleagues for stepping in to help at a very challenging time for everyone.

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## Executive summary

During the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, between March and September 2020, the Young Carers' Service conducted a screening of all their service users to monitor how they were impacted by the pandemic at those early stages. Over 400 families were contacted and the responses received through those phone calls were recorded and divided into six main

categories: impact on caring role, emotional wellbeing, general wellbeing, financial circumstances, education and other general challenges. This report brings together insight drawn from the data collected through the screening and subsequent reflections from the staff who made the calls, Young Carers and their families.





# What we found

## Education

83% of those who responded were in education. Among those who were in education, digital poverty and lack of support from the school caused a lot of anxiety, particularly for those who were meant to sit exams that year.

## Emotional wellbeing

Uncertainty in relation to Covid-19 and social isolation impacted negatively most Young Carers from an emotional wellbeing perspective. About 66% of those who responded used social media as a means to stay connected with their friends. Good relationships with their families were a protective factor for 31% of those who responded.

## Challenges

When asked about what general challenges they were experiencing, 53% of those who responded said that they were managing okay, although what that meant for each family is less clear. Isolation (23%), poor mental health (11%) and general anxiety around Covid-19 (5%) were among the most mentioned challenges.

## Financial

The majority of the YC households faced a lot of uncertainty with regard to their financial circumstances, with many relying on food stamps, carers' allowance or other family members to get by (46%). About 34% of those who responded shared that they were financially stable, although it was less clear what that meant for each household.

## Caring role

For the majority of the YC (50%), the caring role appeared to have remained the same as prior to Covid-19, although the reasons behind it are quite diverse and circumstantial. For others it increased significantly due to government restrictions and Covid related anxieties (17%). For about 13% of those who responded, the caring role had decreased.

## Wellbeing

Most YC seemed to be aware of their mental health (58%) and were engaging in positive activities (41%). About 29% struggled with isolation, poor mental health and general anxieties around Covid-19. Having a good support network was a protective factor for 10% of those who responded.

## Caring for

Mothers represented the most cared for group (54%), while siblings reflected the second most cared for group (40%). About 13% of those who responded cared for more than one person in their family.

## The screening process

The screening was a huge undertaking during the lockdown period but was hugely beneficial and necessary for a myriad of reasons. There were almost 900 YC to contact, ranging from 7-25 years old, with about six members of staff making the phone calls, not all of whom normally worked with the YC. Making the calls felt challenging at times, as contact was made without any warning, some of the contact information was outdated, and many were difficult to get hold of. Many YC were regularly engaged with the service, but there were many others that the service hadn't heard from for a very long time. Making those calls during a time where families were at their most vulnerable state was quite challenging, as the service had limited resources and capacity to support them. Where possible, the service offered case-work support, such as making referrals for food-banks, social services, domestic abuse support, housing or counselling. However, while families were often frustrated about not being able to get through to said services due to Covid-restrictions, they were generally pleasantly surprised and appreciative of the Young Carers Service actively reaching out to them. Having those lines of communication open again led to a number of very positive conversations between the service and the families.

## What happened next

Since the data was not collected with the intention of producing a report, there were some limitations that need to be accounted for. For instance, while over 900 YC were registered with the service, only about 378 entries had complete information along all or most categories. As the service did not necessarily offer direct support, many families were less likely to share the specific struggles that they were facing. There were also cultural barriers and stigma around topics such as finances and mental health that meant that the answers were often brief and vague. Another point that was raised by the team was that often individuals who had multiple challenges going on, did not want any support and preferred to rely on themselves. With those limitations in mind, this report still offers an important snapshot into some of the lived experiences of Young Carers and their families during that time. To ensure this, we asked Young Carers and their families to share their feedback on our findings through an online survey, offering them an opportunity to reflect back on those experiences and share their direct insight into this report. We received 38 responses from this exercise.

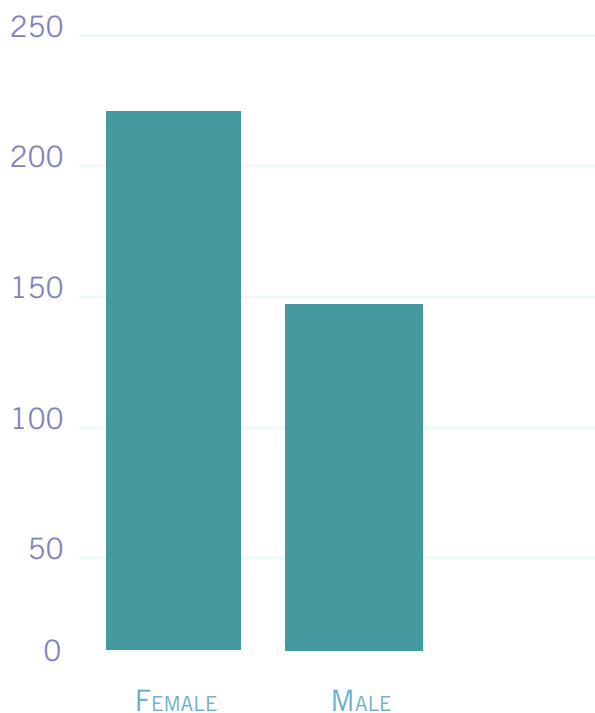


## Some demographic data

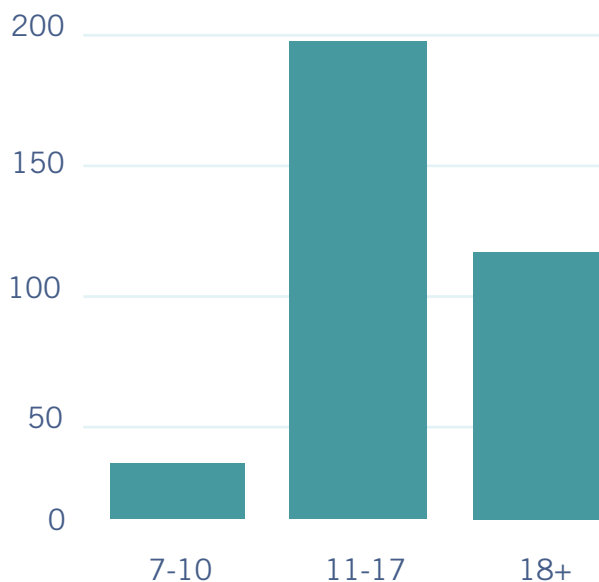
Currently the Young Carers Service relies on the referrer to ask a young person their ethnicity and gender identity, as it is filled in by the referrer before the assessment.

This may bring some limitations with regard to how non-binary and trans young people are reflected in the data, particularly if we account for the stigma around these issues within the family home. Similarly, around race and ethnicity, the information is often dependent on how the parent/carer identifies themselves as, rather than the young person themselves.

### Young carers by gender

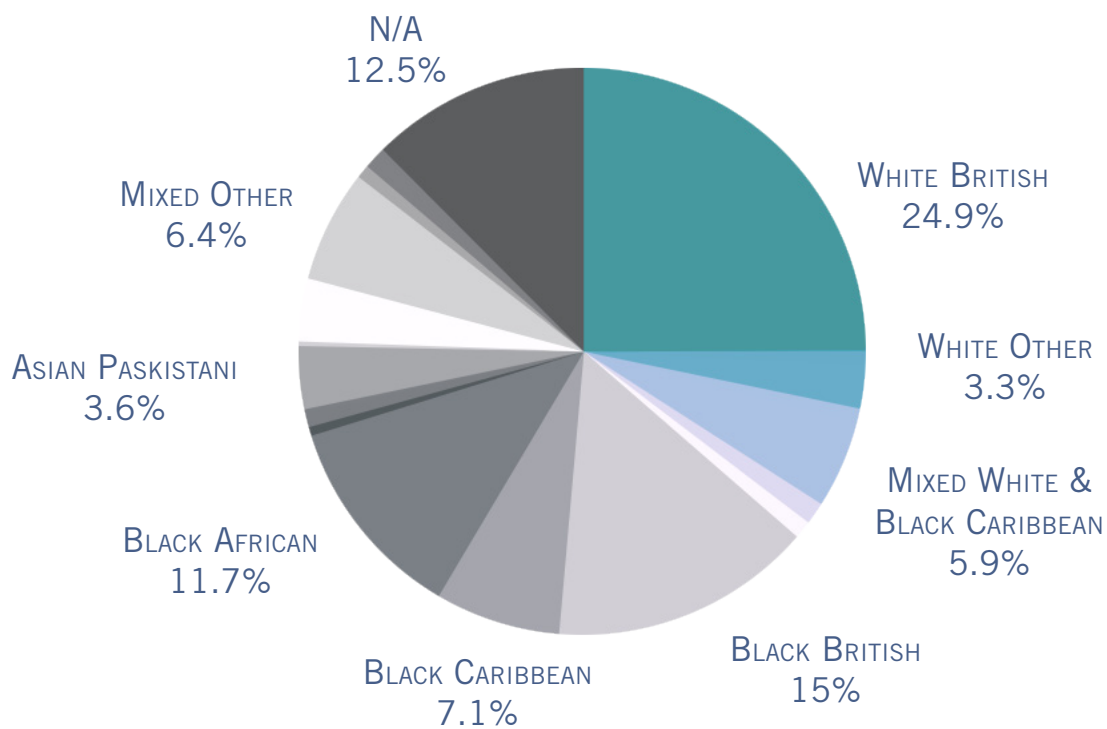


### Young carers by age

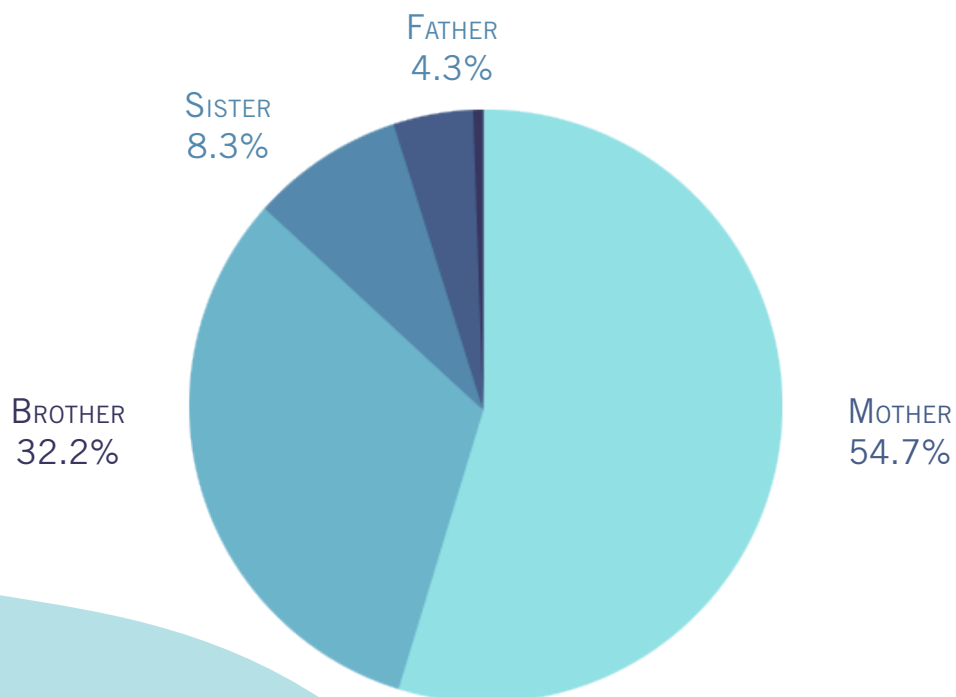




## Young carers by race



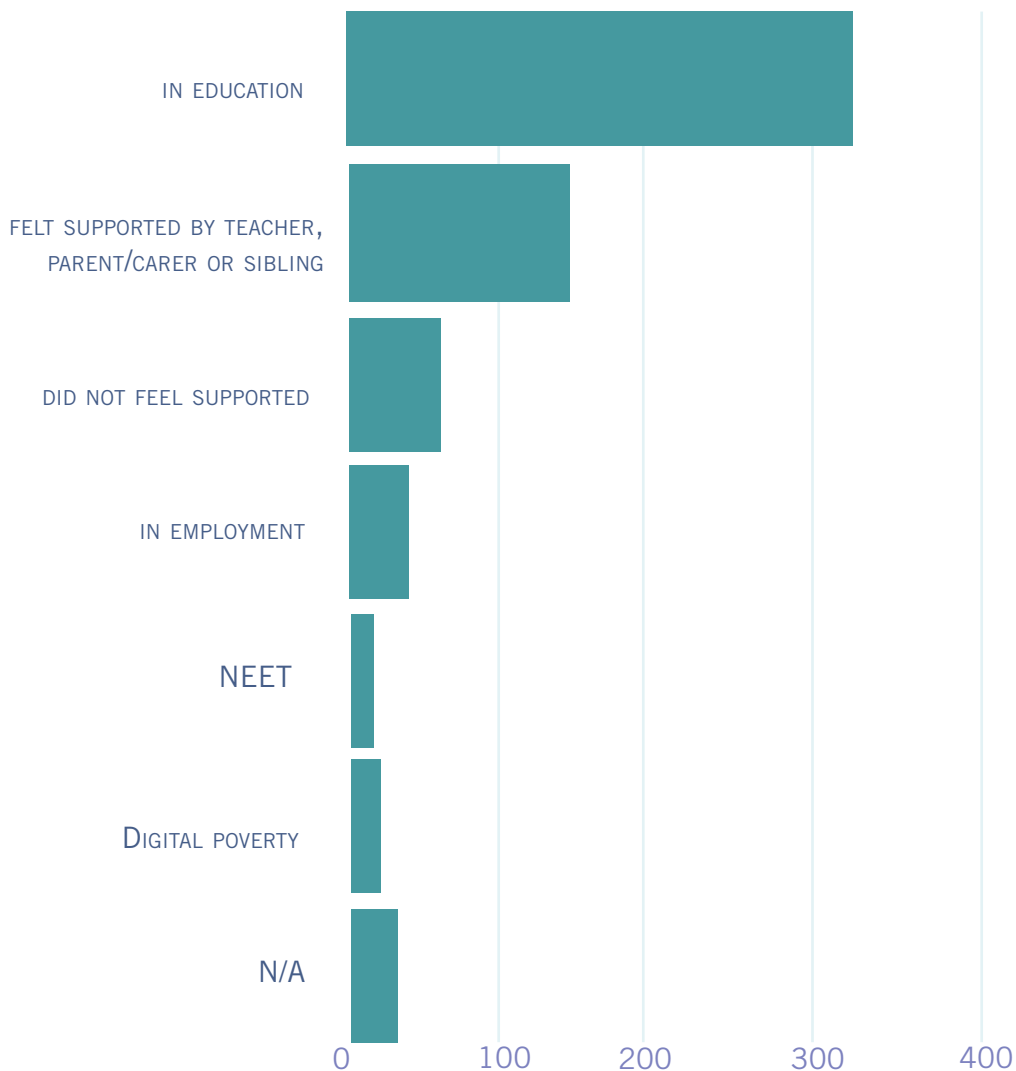
## Caring for



# Education

“ *there was online school, but it was draining, I felt and have lost so much education it worries me a bit.* ”

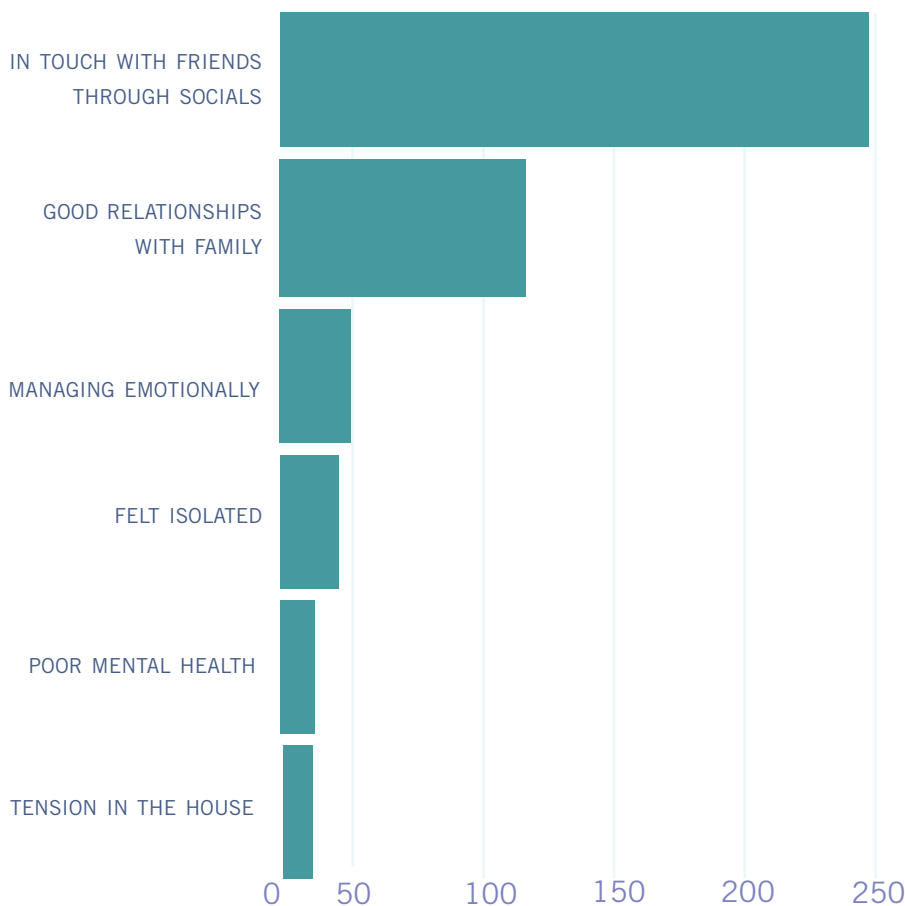
About 83% of those who responded to the screening attended formal education. Some of the challenges that young people faced included anxiety around grades, exams and uncertainty around the future. As many were transitioning into their next academic phase, studying from home without adequate support from their schools meant that they found it really difficult to keep up with their education. For instance, in the online feedback survey a Young Carer shared that *“there was online school, but it was draining, I felt and have lost so much education it worries me a bit”*. However, it’s important to acknowledge that the range of experiences was quite diverse, and that about 54% of the online survey respondents and about 40% of those who took part in the screening, did feel supported as reflected in the following quote by a Young Carer *“school very helpful - teachers checked in with me.”*



# Emotional wellbeing

“ although we have a good relationship, things got tense or just a bit too much because we were always together. ”

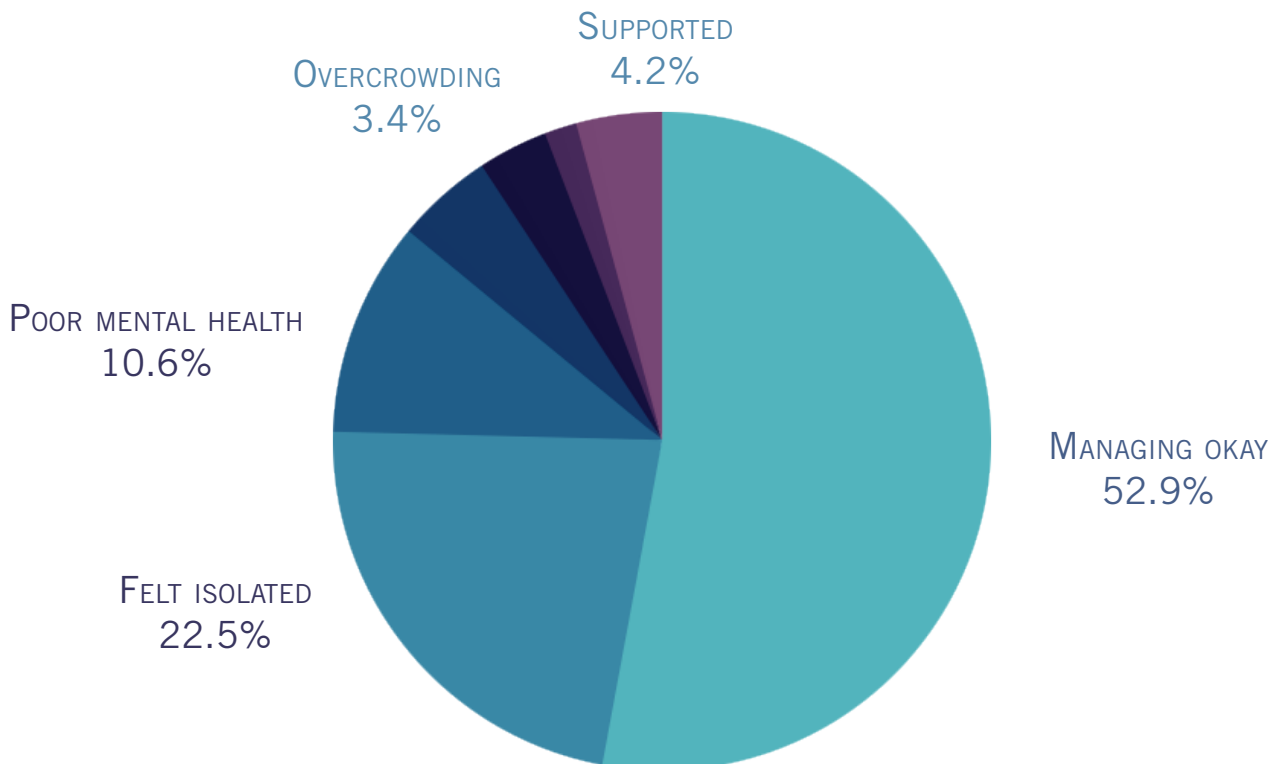
When asked about their emotional wellbeing during the screening, many spoke about relationships that were meaningful to them, particularly in relation to their family and friends. About 66% used social media to stay in touch with their friends, but some still felt isolated. Family dynamics were generally positive, although over time because of lack of personal space in the home, tensions were common. For example, upon reflection, in the feedback survey a Young Carer shared that *“although we have a good relationship, things got tense or just a bit too much because we were always together”* while another shared that they *“stayed in contact with friends, but it wasn’t the same. honestly, nothing was the same. My mental health was bad, and the fact that there were many factors around and I still couldn’t pinpoint what it was frustrated me.”*





# Challenges

While the most common response during the screening around general challenges was that they were 'managing okay' (53%), what that meant for each individual was less clear to the service.



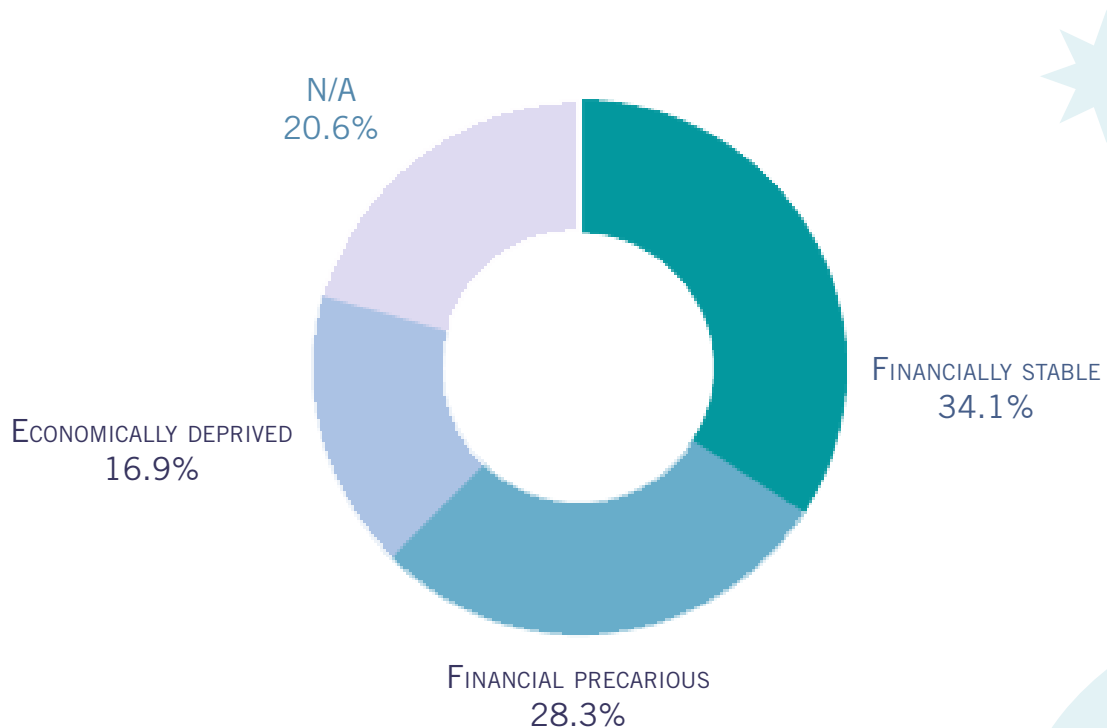
As noted earlier in the report, Young Carers and their families were not expecting a call from the service, hence there were times when calls were brief and respondents only spoke about their most immediate circumstances. However, it's worth noting that when asked about general challenges in the online feedback survey, overcrowding, anxiety around Covid-19, poor mental health and isolation were the top concerns that came up.



# Financial

*“ relied on food vouchers for food, household bills increased because we were using devices more ”*

During the screening conversations around finances were rather tricky for multiple reasons. What emerged within the team upon reflection was that often families were reluctant to share how they were managing financially. Stigma, cultural norms around disclosing one’s problems and shame all played a role, which was also reflected in the high percentage of respondents who did not discuss finances (20%). With that in mind, the majority of those who did respond struggled financially, with 28% stating that although they were not relying on government support, money was a worry and 17% who were mostly dependent on governmental support. Similar responses were shared in the feedback survey, where a parent/carer shared the following *“I was embarrassed, as I was an independent woman”* and another parent/carer shared that they *“relied on food vouchers for food, household bills increased because we were using devices more.”*



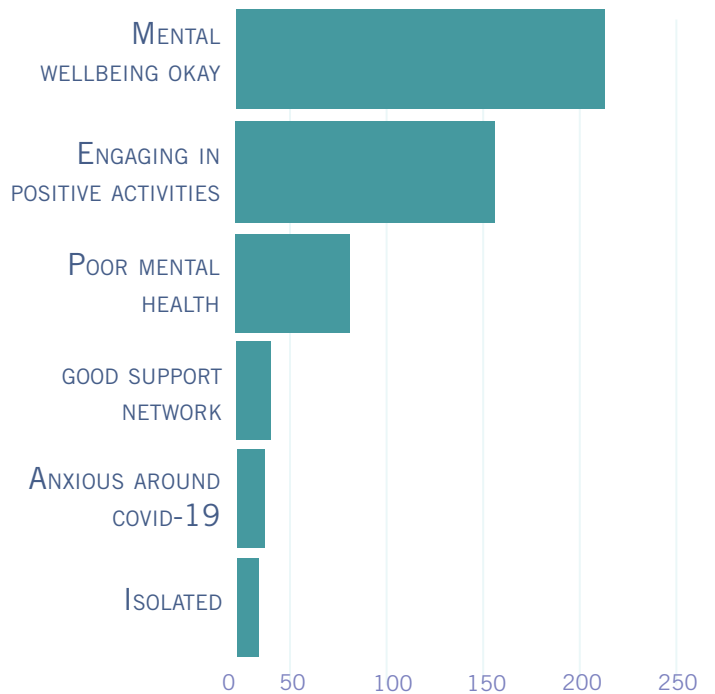
*“ I was embarrassed, as I was an independent woman ”*

# Wellbeing

When asked about their general wellbeing, the majority of those who responded to the screening stated that they were managing okay (58%) although it is difficult to assess what that meant for each individual. Many were engaging in positive activities such as going for walks, online workouts, read or just simply spent quality time with their families. Those who had gardens were able to enjoy that, but for those who did not have an outdoor space, overcrowding and isolation had a significant impact on their mental health. Among those with poor mental health (19%), many lived with a mental health diagnosis or struggled with low mood, anxiety and depression. Others had a family member with pre-existing health conditions that put them at higher risk had they contracted Covid-19.

While there were many young people who were accessing counselling from Off the Record or other mental health support providers, the majority tried to find alternative ways to take care of their mental health. Responses from the feedback survey showed that poor mental health and isolation were the top concerns for Young Carers and their families. A Young Carer shared that *“Everything felt like it was swallowing me whole. Time was lost, I began to feel lost too. Especially as a GCSE student now, I look back and think how it has actually impacted me”* and a parent shared that *“Having sessions online was very tough for my child, as he had become quite anxious”*.

*“ Everything felt like it was swallowing me whole. Time was lost, I began to feel lost too. ”*



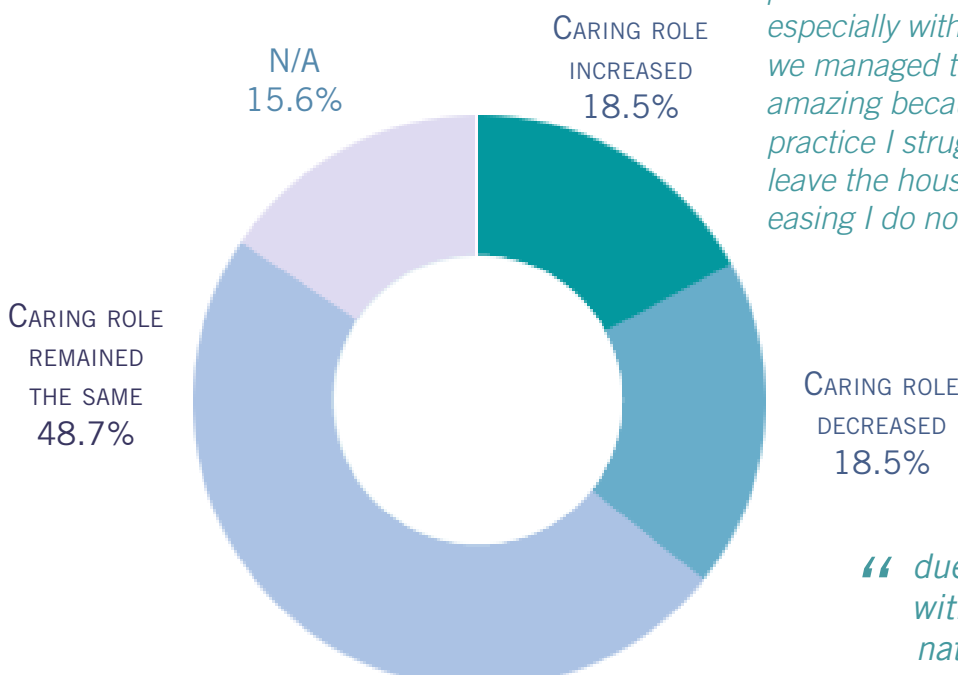


## Caring role

*“ as a vulnerable family, we struggled immensely. Fear of Covid with pre-existing health conditions - had to stay at home all the time to stay safe ”*

During the screening it was difficult to assess any clear trend on how the pandemic had affected the caring role of Young Carers. The range of experiences varied greatly: while for some lockdown meant that caring responsibilities were redistributed within the household (at least initially), for most it meant that their responsibilities (and anxieties) increased greatly. No ‘one’ experience is the same as another, for a variety of complex reasons and circumstances. What we know now, either from anecdotal conversations with individual families and young people, or from the reflections from staff who conducted the initial screenings, is that over the period of the pandemic, caring roles were more likely to increase significantly. It’s important to remember that when we first spoke to the Young Carers and their families the expectation was that we would come out of the pandemic and lockdown within a few months.

When people were eventually able to socialise and be out again, the vast majority of the Young Carers continued to shield to protect their families and many did not even return to school/college/work. We need to therefore be cautious when we see that the data suggests that for the majority of the respondents, the caring role did not change significantly (49%) as the ways in which Young Carers and/or their families quantify their caring role can be highly subjective and normalised within their homes. With that in mind, 34% of our respondents did experience a significant shift where their caring role either increased (most likely) or decreased. In the feedback survey, the majority (47%) shared that their role had increased since the beginning of the pandemic, while 32% stated that their caring role hadn’t changed. Here below are some of the quotes that were shared with us: *“It was a scary season. My worry was focused on the person I care for”; “It was very challenging, especially with extra caring responsibilities but we managed to go through it”; “In theory it was amazing because I had time to relax, but in practice I struggled mentally and felt the urge to leave the house. Ironically, despite restrictions easing I do not leave the house that much”.*



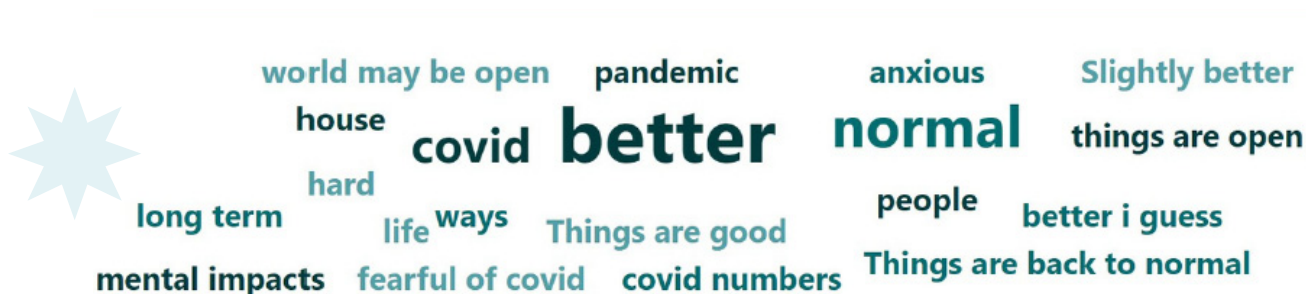
*“ due to spending more time with the person I cared for, naturally, the nature of my role had increased ”*

## Conclusion

In the online feedback survey, we asked Young Carers and their families for some thinking on their experiences of the pandemic and how they were doing now. Reflecting back on the initial phase of the pandemic, most respondents felt frustrated and resentful about the lack of support and guidance they experienced, particularly from statutory services and governmental institutions. Poverty, pre-existing health conditions of a family member, poor mental health, lack of personal space, digital poverty and isolation were all factors that coupled with the uncertainty of a global pandemic, have had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Among the Young Carers, the sense that they had lost/wasted time that they can't get back was prevalent: *"apathetic. But slightly regretful. I feel like I could have utilised this time better to do better at uni"; "it robbed time we can't get back."*



As the restrictions have now been lifted and the world has opened up, most respondents felt more positive and excited to have some resemblance of normality back. Some still expressed some concerns and anxieties around Covid-19, and are finding it challenging to adapt to the new reality. Mental health is still a big concern for Young Carers and their families and more support is needed in that direction.





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