

Mainstreaming **YOUNG CARERS** **IN EU POLICY**

A Eurocarers' Policy Briefing



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Introduction: purpose of the brief

This policy brief is designed as a practical advocacy tool to support Eurocarers members in promoting the recognition and support of young carers within national policies and systems. It aims to help members engage with policymakers and other stakeholders by providing key arguments, policy entry points and practical recommendations.

The timing of advocacy is particularly important. Over the coming months and years, Member States will be translating recent EU initiatives into national policies, measures and reporting processes. This provides an important opportunity for Eurocarers members to ensure that the needs and rights of young carers are reflected in national priorities and actions. Particular attention should be given to ongoing Child Guarantee reporting and monitoring processes, future reviews of National Action Plans, and relevant consultations and stakeholder dialogues linked to child rights, care, gender equality, anti-poverty and intergenerational fairness frameworks. The EU Intergenerational Fairness Strategy and Gender Equality Strategy, both adopted in March 2026, followed by the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, released in May 2026, and most relevantly the strengthened European Child Guarantee also adopted in May 2026 offer particularly important new advocacy opportunities. Members are encouraged to highlight the situation of young carers as a concrete example of intergenerational imbalance and to advocate for safeguards ensuring that children are not expected to compensate for gaps in formal care systems.

Members are encouraged to use this brief to:

- Engage with national Child Guarantee Coordinators, Long-Term Care (LTC) Coordinators, ministries and other relevant authorities to promote the recognition and support of young carers.
- Advocate for the inclusion of young carers in the European Child Guarantee National Action Plans, Progress Reports, and other relevant policy frameworks.
- Use the provided Young Carers' audit checklist to identify gaps and priorities for action.
- Provide evidence and arguments to support policy change.
- Engage with schools, healthcare providers, social services and other relevant stakeholders to promote better identification and support mechanisms.
- Involve young carers in advocacy activities and consultations.
- Collaborate with other organisations and networks to strengthen advocacy efforts.

Members are encouraged to adapt the content of this brief to their national context, while maintaining the core messages and objectives as an aid. Used effectively, this brief can support timely, targeted and evidence-based advocacy, helping ensure that young carers are recognised and supported within national policies.

Who are young Carers & why their recognition matters

Definition

YOUNG CARERS are children and young people under the age of 18 who provide regular, informal and unpaid care to a family member or a close person with a disability, chronic illness, mental health condition or substance dependency.

Their responsibilities can include practical support, emotional care, household management and, in some cases, personal or health-related care. The nature and intensity of care vary considerably. Some young carers provide occasional support, while others take on substantial caring responsibilities for many hours each week, often without recognition or support. Young carers are part of the broader group of informal carers, but their situation is distinct because of their age and developmental stage. Across the European Union, it is estimated that between 4% and 10% of children have caring responsibilities, although the true figure is likely to be higher due to limited data collection and the hidden nature of the phenomenon.

Why Recognition Matters

Many young carers are not identified by schools, health systems or social services and may not recognise themselves as carers. As a result, their needs often remain invisible. Evidence shows that caring responsibilities can affect young carers' education, social participation, physical and mental health, and future opportunities. Difficulties balancing school and care, social isolation and increased emotional stress are commonly reported. At the same time, caring can also foster positive qualities such as responsibility, empathy and resilience, particularly when appropriate support is available. Without recognition, young carers may struggle to access the support, services and accommodations they need, increasing the risk of long-term disadvantage.

The Case for a Cross-Sectoral Approach

Young carers do not fit neatly within a single policy area. Their situation sits at the intersection of child rights, education, health, care, gender equality and social inclusion. Recognising young carers as a distinct group is therefore a necessary first step towards ensuring that their rights, needs and contributions are reflected across policy, services and support systems. Effective responses require coordinated action across sectors rather than isolated measures within a single area of policy.

Current Policy Opportunities

Although young carers are not explicitly recognised in EU policy frameworks, several recent initiatives provide important opportunities to strengthen their visibility and support at national level. Eurocarers members can use the following policy developments as entry points for advocacy and dialogue with policymakers.

European Child Guarantee

The European Child Guarantee aims to ensure access to essential services for children in vulnerable situations, including education, healthcare, nutrition and housing. Young carers fall within this group, yet they are rarely explicitly recognised in National Action Plans or biennial progress reports.

→ **The ongoing implementation and monitoring of the Child Guarantee, alongside the new momentum created by the strengthened European Child Guarantee adopted in 2026, provides an important opportunity for members to advocate for the inclusion of young carers in national policies, reporting processes and support measures.**

EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness

The Intergenerational Fairness Strategy seeks to ensure that policy decisions do not place disproportionate burdens on younger generations. Young carers represent a clear example of intergenerational imbalance, where children may assume caring responsibilities because of gaps in formal care systems.

→ **Members are encouraged to use this new policy framework to advocate for safeguards that prevent children from being expected to compensate for shortcomings in care provision and to promote recognition of young carers within national discussions on intergenerational fairness.**

Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030

The new Gender Equality Strategy recognises the unequal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities as a key driver of inequality. Although young carers are not explicitly addressed, evidence suggests that girls are more likely to take on caring responsibilities, potentially affecting their education, well-being and future opportunities.

→ **The Strategy therefore provides an opportunity to highlight young carers as a gender equality issue and to advocate for their inclusion in national gender equality policies and measures.**

EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy aims to reduce poverty and social exclusion and to break cycles of disadvantage across generations. Young carers are often part of households facing complex social, health and economic challenges, while their caring responsibilities may limit educational and employment opportunities.

→ **Members can use this framework to advocate for the recognition of young carers as a group at risk of disadvantage and to promote targeted measures that support both young carers and their families.**

Taken together, these initiatives provide multiple opportunities to raise awareness of young carers and to promote their inclusion in national policies, services and reporting processes.

Young Carers Policy Audit Checklist

The following checklist is designed as a practical advocacy tool for Eurocarers members and other stakeholders seeking to assess how well young carers are recognised and supported within national policies and systems.

Eurocarers members can draw from it as a reminder of key advocacy actions to take. They can use it to:

- ➔ Review the national European Child Guarantee Action Plan and other relevant policy frameworks to identify whether, and to what extent, young carers are recognised, included and addressed.
- ➔ Identify gaps and priorities for national-level advocacy, including missing measures, insufficient coordination, or lack of data and support services.
- ➔ Engage in dialogue with policymakers, Child Guarantee Coordinators, LTC coordinators, and other relevant stakeholders.
- ➔ Contribute to policy consultations, monitoring processes and reporting exercises, drawing on this policy brief.
- ➔ Track progress over time by revisiting the checklist and assessing improvements in recognition, support and outcomes and regularly following up with national stakeholders holding influencing power on the policy developments and reporting.

Used effectively, the checklist can help translate awareness into concrete advocacy actions and support efforts to ensure that young carers are recognised and reflected in national policies, services and reporting processes.

Area	Key Questions for Assessment
Recognition and Visibility	• Are young carers explicitly recognised in national policies and strategies? • Is a clear and consistent definition used? • Are young carers referenced in relevant reporting and monitoring frameworks?
Identification and Data	• Are mechanisms in place to identify young carers across education, health and social services? • Is data being collected on the situation and outcomes of young carers? • Is this information being used to inform policy and funding decisions?
Education	• Are schools equipped to identify and support young carers? • Are flexible arrangements and appropriate supports available? • Are staff trained to recognise and respond to young carers? • Are measures in place to reduce educational disadvantage and prevent early school leaving?
Healthcare and Mental Health	• Do young carers have access to appropriate healthcare and mental health support? • Are services adapted to the specific circumstances of young carers? • Is respite and emotional support available when needed?
Family and Social Support	• Are services available to support families with care needs? • Are services coordinated across sectors and accessible to families?
Participation	• Are young carers involved in policymaking and service design? • Are consultation mechanisms accessible and meaningful? • Are the views of young carers reflected in decisions, policies, and monitoring frameworks?
Implementation and Funding	• Are adequate resources allocated to support young carers? • Are responsibilities clearly defined across authorities? • Is progress being monitored and evaluated? • Are identified gaps being addressed over time?

Recommendations

After reviewing the above audit checklist and answering the questions as they pertain to each national context, Euro-carers members can then request to have policy dialogues with key stakeholders. In addition to presenting the data and arguments above, members can also draw on the following recommendations.

At National Level, Member States should:

- Recognise young carers in national policies, including in the Child Guarantee Action Plans, the Country Reports and National Reform Programmes linked to the European Semester Process, and other policies and reporting processes.
- Establish mechanisms to identify and support young carers across education, health and social services.
- Provide and foster young carers' access to appropriate educational, mental health, respite and family support services.
- Strengthen data collection and monitoring to ensure that young carers are visible in national statistics and policy development.
- Involve young carers in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and services that affect them.

At EU level, the European Commission should:

- Explicitly recognise young carers across relevant EU policy frameworks and initiatives: including in the upcoming European Care Deal (2027)
- Strengthen data collection and monitoring to improve understanding of young carers' experiences and outcomes.
- Promote the use of policy tools, such as the Youth Check, to ensure that children are not expected to compensate for gaps in formal care systems.
- Support the exchange of good practices and the development of services that identify and support young carers.
- Ensure that young carers are meaningfully involved in relevant policymaking and consultation processes.

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