## Widening participation in higher education for young carers

### What is the initiative?
Compass: Young Carers Programme

### Who runs it?
Widening Participation, University of Oxford

### Who does it benefit?
Young carers aged 14–16 at state schools in Oxfordshire, with the potential to progress to further or higher education.

### What does it do?
Compass is a sustained contact programme for young carers in Year 10 and Year 11 with the aim of raising educational aspiration and attainment. Through a range of engaging activities, participants build their confidence, recognise their skills and increase their familiarity with the culture of higher education, in addition to enjoying new experiences outside of the normal routine of their caring roles.

### When did it start?
2009.

### Why was it started?
The Widening Participation team at the University of Oxford works to promote tertiary education and improve the attainment of those students currently underrepresented in higher education. They were aware from the Oxfordshire mapping of young carers in schools that young carers in the county achieved lower GCSE grades and were more likely to be persistently absent from school and once past compulsory school age to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than the county average. Compass: Young Carers Programme is part of a wider effort to tackle educational disengagement among young carers in Oxfordshire.
Research by Aimhigher, the national programme to encourage progression to higher education, had demonstrated that sustained contact with a clear cohort of students and targeted objectives was effective. To ensure they had a solid evidence base when devising the Compass programme, the Widening Participation team at Oxford sought advice from Professor Saul Becker from Young Carers International Research and Evaluation at Nottingham University, and discussed interventions with the Young Carers team at Oxfordshire County Council and local carers charities such as SpurgeonsUK.

What are the aims and objectives?

Aims:
- To increase the numbers of young carers progressing to tertiary education.
- To improve the GCSE attainment of young carers.

Objectives:
- To promote tertiary learning to young carers.
- To give young carers an insight into university life.
- To build the confidence of young carers.
- To help young carers to recognise their skills.

How is it funded?

The programme is solely funded by Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach at the University of Oxford with funds allocated from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Widening Participation block grant.

What has it achieved?

“I now know what I need to [do to] achieve my goals.”

Young carer

“I just wanted to say a huge, huge thank you for everything you’ve done over the period [my son] has been at Compass. He’s had a really brilliant time, and we’ve noticed a significant difference in him as a result of it. Thank you so, so much – we really appreciate what you’re doing and think it’s absolutely amazing. It’s a wonderful scheme and a fantastic opportunity.”

Parent

Compass participants have demonstrated improved self-confidence and esteem and an increased desire to pursue higher education. Some of the more challenging activities on the programme, such as public speaking, have gained the best feedback from participants as they have pushed them to do things they did not imagine were possible. Parents of young people participating in the Compass
programme to date have been impressed and noticed a positive change in their child.

The positive results can also be seen in the increased positive and/or decreased negative scores on the PANOC-YC20 scale used to measure the outcomes of caring. The details of the scores are currently being analysed and will be available in a forthcoming evaluation.

Once the participants reach the age of 18 and if they move on to higher education, the Compass team will be able to monitor their progress through the new Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) database. The HEAT database will show what university the young carer has gone to and what course they are doing. As it is up to the young carers themselves to disclose their actual A-level and GCSE grades to Compass, the university data from HEAT will allow the Compass team to get a good estimate of participants’ A-level results, if they chose not to disclose them.

As Compass does not have free access to participants’ exam results, it is currently chasing up its first cohort who finished year 11 in 2012 by contacting their schools. Once there is sufficient data, it will be possible to compare the GCSE results of Compass finishers with other Oxfordshire young carers and their non-young carer peers, using the data collected by the Oxfordshire mapping of young carers in schools project.

The programme has raised the profile of school aged carers in the local area, including in schools themselves. Active engagement with the programme is encouraged by Oxfordshire County Council’s new Schools Standards. Through helping at the young carers pastoral care training of the six secondary schools involved in Oxfordshire County Council’s Attainment Project, the Widening Participation team have been able to talk directly to local schools about Compass too.

**How have carers been involved in planning and delivering this work?**

Feedback on sessions and recruitment is requested at every step from participants and parents. The Widening Participation team collects pre- and post- intervention questionnaires and session feedback and has conducted externally-run focus groups with participants.

**How is the initiative run?**

Compass: Young Carers Programme is one of three programmes delivered by the Widening Participation department at the University of Oxford. There is one full-time co-ordinator for the programme, aided by a part-time administration assistant in the department. When the young carers come for the workshop sessions the team has the support of volunteer mentors who are students at the university.

Young carers find out about the programme via schools and local young carers projects. Interested young carers and their parents then fill in an application form, which asks the young carers questions such as what they hope to gain from the programme, what they believe their strengths and weaknesses are, whether they have thought about higher education and what qualifications their parents have.

---

When the Widening Participation team receives the application form, they get in touch with the young carer’s school for a supporting statement used in the selection process, to confirm the applicant’s details and to get further emergency contact details, in order to fulfil safeguarding requirements.

Participants are selected for the programme first and foremost on the basis that they are a young carer and then secondly that they come from a background with little or no family history of higher education. As the programme becomes more well-known and competition for places increases, additional selection criteria may also be used, with priority given to under-represented groups such as young people who have a disability, come from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background, are looked after by the local authority or come from a military service family. With regards to academic ability, Compass is quite flexible and has quite a diverse cohort in terms of participants’ current academic success.

The programme is completely free of charge for the participants. Compass pays for return travel to the sessions, all meals and refreshments on site, accommodation for the residential element and all materials. The cost per participant is around £500, with costs varying according to their travel needs. Compass has the capacity to support a maximum of 40 young carers a year.

For Year 11 participants there are five workshops over a period of two months in the autumn term, with a two night residential in the Easter holidays. For Year 10 participants, there are six workshops over a period of three months in the spring term, culminating with a two night residential slightly later in the Easter holidays. There is a family celebration day for both cohorts at the end of the programme year.

Over the course of the programme, participants work with Widening Participation staff, current undergraduate students, tutors and representatives of local businesses to reflect on their own skills, experience and aspirations. Each of the workshops, which are held every fortnight, is themed around a topic such as identity, assertiveness, careers and personal effectiveness. Activities include subject taster sessions, public speaking and a theatre trip. The workshops run from 10am until 4pm on Saturday, and include lunch at a college of Oxford University. Most activities are delivered on campus, although there has been a site trip to Oxford Brookes University and visits to other higher education institutions including the University of Winchester are planned for the future.

The residential element at the end of the programme gives the young carers a chance to experience life as a university student. They stay in individual rooms in single-sex accommodation at a college of the university, dine at the colleges and take part in fun educational activities across the university. Year 11 participants attend supported revision sessions too, as they are about one month away from sitting their GCSE exams. A member of the Widening Participation team and student volunteers supervise the young carers at all times.

After the programme of activities ends, participants are encouraged to let the Widening Participation team know how they get on at GCSE and A-level, or equivalent, and whether they choose to apply to university. Disclosure of GCSE and A-level results to the University of Oxford is up to the young carers themselves.
What methods have been particularly effective?

The Compass programme is underpinned by a strong personal development ethos, with activities which aim to build the confidence and assertiveness of participants and not merely equip them with information. Activities such as public speaking have gained lots of positive feedback and are believed to make the programme effective in the long run, as young carers with more confidence are more likely to achieve at school.

Creating strong working relationships with agencies working with young carers locally such as SpurgeonsUK and Oxfordshire County Council, has proved an effective means of raising the profile of school-aged carers in Oxfordshire. For instance, the Compass team spoke at the pastoral care training session for Oxfordshire County Council’s Attainment Project. Targeting education professionals in this way is also a highly effective means of promoting the Compass programme.

Have there been any challenges along the way?

The biggest challenge has been that young carers are often hidden within the education system. The Widening Participation team expected to identify and recruit many young carers through schools, yet found schools were often not able to identify their young carers. To its credit, this is something which Oxfordshire County Council is committed to changing through its Young Carers Strategy, Attainment Project to raise young carers’ attainment in secondary schools, and schools standards.

Recruitment of young carers onto the programme has been a time-intensive process due to the lack of awareness of young carers in schools and the anxiety of some young carers when it comes to trying something new.

What hints and tips might help me get started?

- Investigate your local young carers landscape thoroughly – look at how young carers are performing in school, what schools know and what efforts are currently being made to help the educational achievement and aspiration of young carers.

- Start by contacting your local authority and local charities – it is crucial that they are on board.

- Be persistent. Push for face-to-face meetings with potential partners and keep working to build a strong reputation with partners, local charities and schools.

Are there any useful documents or resources that could assist me?

Visit the University of Oxford’s Compass website. Here you can find the latest versions of the Application Information and the Application Form for participants. The Application Information lists the themes of each workshop and gives an idea of the activities which can be expected. An evaluation of the programme is forthcoming and will be made available on this Oxford Compass website too.
Where can I get further information?

Widening Participation team
University of Oxford
Email: wp@admin.ox.ac.uk
Tel: 01865 280198

Sian Renwick
Widening Participation Co-ordinator
Email: sian.renwick@admin.ox.ac.uk
Tel: 01865 280135

Funded by

Department for Education