

Changes to the Care to Learn Childcare Support Scheme

Analysis of the responses to the consultation and the
Government's response

2 July 2012

Executive Summary

The Department for Education carried out a nine week consultation, from 26 August to 28 October 2011, to consider four options for changes to the Care to Learn childcare support scheme. This document provides an analysis of the replies to the consultation followed by the Government's response.

The consultation was held because whilst the Government recognised the value of Care to Learn it felt that a combination of resource constraints and a predicted increase in demand would necessitate changes to the scheme. The consultation responses suggested that the scheme operated well and was valued greatly by those that benefited from it. If a change to Care to Learn was necessary, however, the majority of respondents would be in favour of limiting the eligibility for Care to Learn to young parents who were aged 18 or under at the beginning of their course.

On completion of the consultation the Government delayed publishing the results and extended the existing scheme unchanged for a further year. This was to allow a more considered response in the light of the most recent Care to Learn take up rates and further discussions with representatives. Analysis of Care to Learn take up in the 2011/12 academic year suggests the current scheme can be managed within the budget available and that there is no need now to change the scheme due to financial pressures.

The Government has decided therefore, not to change eligibility for Care to Learn or the other scheme criteria. This reflects the Government's commitment to helping young people, and in this case young parents, to participate in education prior to the age of compulsory participation in education or training being raised to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015.

The consultation asked respondents to consider four options for change to the scheme – in order to ensure that rising demand could be met:

- Option 1 – Deliver Care to Learn as a discrete programme through colleges/school 6th forms.
- Option 2 – Assess the eligibility for Care to Learn on the basis of the young parent's income.
- Option 3 – Reduce the maximum weekly amounts that are payable for childcare costs.
- Option 4 – Limit the eligibility for Care to Learn to young parents who are aged 18 or under at the beginning of their course (this was the preferred option).

This report is based on 329 responses to the consultation document. As some respondents did not select an option, a fifth option has been added (no selection made) in order to capture the comments from these respondents.

The breakdown of respondents was as follows:

Other (please specify)*	85	26%
Local Authority:	72	22%
College:	44	13%
Young Parent:	27	8%
Connexions:	23	7%
Parent:	12	4%
Representative Body:	12	4%
School:	11	3%
Sixth Form:	10	3%
Training Organisation:	10	3%
Independent Learning Provider:	8	2%
Sixth Form College:	8	2%
Young Person:	7	2%
Total:	329	100%

* Representatives that fell into the 'other' category included Charities such as Barnados, Centrepoint and Platform 51, Trade Unions such as the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC), childminders and friends/buddies of teenage parents.

Overview

The following provides an overview of the responses to each proposed option.

Option 1 - Deliver Care to Learn as a discrete programme through colleges/school 6th forms.

Under a fifth of respondents (18 per cent) favoured this option. Respondents who supported this option felt that providers have knowledge of the local needs of young parents and are in closer contact with them. This option would also allow Care to Learn to be managed on the same basis as other forms of financial support, such as the 16-19 Bursary Fund and adult discretionary learner support (including childcare for adult learners).

Respondents who did not support this option were concerned that it might deter young parents from using Care to Learn because providers might restrict them to their own on site childcare provision. Concerns were also raised that this option would place a prohibitive administrative burden on providers who would need to develop systems to ensure Care to Learn was administered properly and within the 28 days application period. Considering the unpredictable nature of local demand and other features of the scheme, this may well prove to be an inefficient use of resources for many providers, in particular smaller ones.

Other concerns included worries that devolving funding to providers would result in a lack of equity as providers develop their own criteria, it could lead to means testing, and that local arrangements might lead to delayed decision making - meaning young parents might not be assured that childcare support would be available prior to enrolling. This issue of prior assurance is particularly important to young parents so it is likely that any uncertainty would have an impact on whether they enrolled in the first place.

Option 2 - Assess the eligibility for Care to Learn on the basis of the young parent's income.

Only 13 per cent of respondents supported the introduction of means testing. Those who supported this option noted that some young parents are living with families who are able to support them, or with a partner who is working, and that the Care to Learn scheme does not currently take this into account.

Respondents who did not support this option felt that the administrative costs would be disproportionately high, and that it could encourage young parents to leave home and claim benefits so that their income fell below the income assessment levels. They felt it was wrong to rely on families to provide support when the young person was the parent. Also, given the cost of living is increasing, if families were expected to contribute to childcare costs this would be prohibitively expensive for some. This is likely to have an impact on whether the family of a young parent decides that re-engagement with education or training is an option they can afford. Respondents felt that the scheme was already well targeted with around 70 per cent of Care to Learn recipients in receipt of benefit.

Option 3 - Reduce the maximum weekly amounts that are payable for childcare costs.

There was little support for reducing the maximum weekly amounts that are payable for childcare costs (3 per cent). Those in support of this option said that most young parents undertake part time study already and do not require the maximum weekly allowance. Those who opposed this option said it would provide limits on the types of provision a young parent could access including full time learning.

Option 4 – Limit the eligibility for Care to Learn to young parents who are aged 18 or under at the beginning of their course from September 2012 (this was the Government's preferred option).

57 per cent of respondents agreed with the Government's preferred option to limit the eligibility in this way. A number of respondents commented that of all the available options this would have the least impact on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Respondents noted that childcare support would still be available to 19 year old parents although at the discretion of the learning provider.

Respondents said it would be important, however, to ensure that parents aged 20 and over remain able to access support – which would be through adult discretionary learner support if there were changes to the age criteria for Care to Learn. Respondents commented that this would result in an increased demand for adult discretionary learner support and there were concerns about the ability of this fund to support those 19 year olds who would be unable to claim via Care to Learn.

Respondents who did not support this option said that it would unfairly impact on 19 year olds and could create additional barriers to them returning to learning and therefore result in some of them not participating. Some respondents also raised concerns that it could push parents into returning to education or training before they are ready. The experience of some respondents suggests many young parents aren't ready to re-engage with education or training until they are 19 or 20.

There were also concerns that young parents would not get assurance about the availability of childcare support for the **whole** of their course - because support for learners older than 18 would be discretionary. As with option 1, it is likely that any uncertainty resulting from a lack of prior assurance would have an impact on enrolments.

No selection made (**Option 5**).

9 per cent of respondents were unable to support any of the four options. The alternatives they suggested included making no changes to the scheme and managing levels of Care to Learn through local authorities.

Summary

If a change to Care to Learn was necessary, the majority of respondents would be in favour of limiting the eligibility for Care to Learn to young parents who were aged 18 or under at the beginning of their course. The following concerns, however, were also raised about this option:

- it could result in some young parents returning to education or training before they were ready;
- the alternative for young parents aged 19 or over is adult discretionary learner support and this would not provide assurance to these students that their childcare would be supported throughout their course;
- that discretionary funds for over 19 years might not be increased to allow for those extra students that would no longer be eligible for Care to Learn funding.

Response

The Government has considered the responses to the consultation 'Changes to the Care to Learn Childcare Support Scheme' alongside the latest Care to Learn take up rates and a range of informal feedback from representatives. The consultation showed that if a change to Care to Learn was necessary the majority of respondents would be in favour of limiting the age eligibility.

The original premise for change was to manage rising costs and to meet the demands of an expected increase in take up. Analysis of the latest data, however, has found that Care to Learn take up in the 2011/12 academic year, has been lower than expected.

The Government therefore does not propose to change eligibility for Care to Learn or other scheme criteria.