

Who Cares? Scotland's Response to the Education and Skills Committee Call for Evidence on Covid-19

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Who Cares? Scotland's Approach to Covid-19

Who Cares? Scotland (WC?S) is an independent advocacy and influencing organisation working with people who have experience of the care system. We provide direct advocacy, as well as opportunities for local and national participation. WC?S aims to provide Care Experienced people in Scotland with knowledge of their rights. We strive to empower them to positively participate in the formal structures and processes they are often subject to solely because of their care experience. At WC?S we ensure the voice of the Care Experienced population of Scotland informs everything we do as an organisation.

During the outbreak of Covid-19, WC?S has stepped into a new space as an organisation by providing a helpline service, which is [open via phone and e-mail 7 days a week](#) to any Care Experienced person or kinship carer who needs support during this time. This helpline seeks to provide a main point of contact and support for Care Experienced people, recognising that they are particularly vulnerable during this public health crisis and are likely to be disproportionately impacted by the measures in place, with the potential to leave them isolated, anxious and destitute. The helpline has been developed to try and mitigate some of the short-term impacts of the virus on the Care Experienced community in Scotland and sits alongside the continuation of our advocacy, participation and employment work, which has adapted to operate digitally and over the phone. We have taken this approach because we understand the impact of the measures introduced, such as social distancing, means that many individuals will be without the support network they need to cope and that the virus has had an unprecedented impact on many people's employment and financial stability.

As an organisation, we recognise that front-line health and care services are responding in an environment of unprecedented challenge. However, the impact of Covid-19 is also exposing the challenge of upholding human rights of Care Experienced people during this time, whilst mitigating the effects of the virus. This is why we are monitoring the impact of the outbreak on Care Experienced people's lives by sensitively analysing information shared by individuals contacting our helpline and by reviewing the issues raised by Care Experienced people we support both through our advocacy provision and employment support.

Our Evidence: Relevant Themes for the Committee

We have included a full version of our latest impact report alongside this briefing, which is based on the evidence collected by our organisation between 20th March and 9th April 2020. We would strongly urge the Committee to read the latest impact report in addition to this paper. Below is a summary of relevant themes from this report for the Committee to consider. We are keen to highlight the particular impact of the virus on the lives of vulnerable families, such as those in kinship care arrangements and those who are Care Experienced parents, and of the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people currently living in care.

Digital exclusion

Difficulties in accessing appropriate technology and Wi-Fi is a continual theme for those we are supporting and covers a variety of issues. As well as not having the hardware required to get online or the internet connection in order to access key information and websites, individuals have also reported a lack of confidence in how to use the technology they are provided with or own.

We are very concerned by the digital exclusion being experienced by those we support, as digital access is now key to participating in the formal processes that many children and young people in care regularly experience. Care Experienced children and young people have participation rights protected by the UNCRC and by domestic law in Scotland to ensure their voice is heard in a variety of decision-making processes, ranging from Children's Hearings and Looked After Children Reviews. The operation of many of these meetings has necessarily moved to digital spaces to protect participants from being exposed to the virus¹, however, a lack of digital access immediately erodes the ability of certain individuals to exercise these crucial participation rights. However, we understand much work is being done to combat digital exclusion by the Children's Hearing System and the Scottish Child Reporter's Administration, as they work to ensure that the voice of children and young people can still be heard in this vital decision-making forum.

There are also further issues for Care Experienced young people who are able to connect digitally, when using technology to participate in meetings. Some have told us they can find it an invasive experience, with professionals and panel members gaining too much access to their private space and home environments through video calls. This shows the importance not only of connecting Care Experienced people to digital spaces but also understanding the impact using such methods might have on their wellbeing or ability to feel engaged meaningfully in these potentially difficult meetings.

Additionally, digital exclusion is also impacting vulnerable families, especially those in kinship care arrangements which may not be recognised by statutory support services², and Care Experienced parents coping with childcare responsibilities during the outbreak. For these families to provide access to education and opportunities for play to those they care for, they will need access to digital spaces, especially with schools relying on digital communication to continue providing education. Digital exclusion also creates barriers for carers and Care Experienced parents to access support and information online.

Education

We are also concerned about discrepancies in the availability of school places during lockdown for children in vulnerable families. This has been impacting families in kinship care arrangements and Care Experienced parents who have contacted us. There have been mixed experiences of children being offered places in schools, with some families being notified, others not receiving an offer at all and some also being refused a place when one is requested. Carers and parents contacting us have also felt that conversations about school

¹ The Children's Hearing System are now delivering meetings via digital platforms, information available on their website here: <https://www.scra.gov.uk/contact-us/coronavirus-attending-childrens-hearings/>

² Families in informal kinship care arrangements are not recognised as requiring statutory support from social services in Scotland. WC?S has received funding from the Scottish Government to provide a limited amount of support to informal kinship carers and their families, as they have been recognised as particularly vulnerable during the virus.

places can be contradictory to the health advice to households to stay at home during the outbreak, to ensure they are protected from contracting the virus. There also are cases where the carer or parent may feel unable to send their child to school, for example due to shielding. In these cases, schools must be proactive in supporting families by providing technology and access to digital education opportunities, so that children living within these families can keep learning if possible. Our concern is that there may be a lack of resources available to these families to support their child to learn online, as highlighted in our section regarding the impact of the digital exclusion. We have heard specific cases through our helpline about the impact of digital exclusion on maintaining a child's education.

We have heard that it is not clear to carers and families, or local decision makers, whether the Scottish Government's definition of vulnerable includes children in kinship care – and whether this would extend to both formal and informal placements. Furthermore, many individuals have told us it is unclear who is responsible for deciding the allocation of school placements, with different processes in place in different areas. This approach has often led to implications where children in informal kinship placements have been overlooked and at times has led to some kinship carers being unsure how to engage. Some carers and parents have told us that they do not feel able to ask for support, for fear of being judged as not coping.

Mental health

The impact of social distancing measures is widely understood to be having an impact on the mental health of many individuals in Scotland.³ This has been echoed in the experiences Care Experienced people have shared with us, specifically in how isolated many individuals feel during this period of lockdown. For the Care Experienced people we support this has been particularly linked to the impact of limited contact with family and friends, which is especially difficult for those who are looked after and accommodated in residential settings, or living in care arrangements away from their family and social connections. Children and young people in care cannot currently physically meet with people who provide important connections in their lives. This is understandably proving extremely difficult to adjust to for many and is impacting on relationship mediation between children in care and their families.

Throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, we have also been supporting Care Experienced parents who are struggling with the negative impact of the virus on their mental health. Some of these parents have a very limited network they can rely on for extra support. They may be unable to receive support from services or friends and family to cope with the challenges of parenting during the outbreak. For many who are also single parents without the support of a separated partner, the inability to share parenting, in addition to limited support networks, is placing real strain on family dynamics. This has created concern about the risk of a new population of children being brought into the care system unnecessarily as a result.

Poverty

We are consistently being contacted about the significant financial challenges and situations of poverty many individuals currently face, as a direct consequence of Covid-19. There is an

³ The increased impact on mental health has been recognised by Scottish Government, with additional investment in services and third sector support, as well as the Clear Your Head campaign: <https://www.gov.scot/news/new-mental-health-support/>

increasing reliance on social security and the benefits system, creating challenges for vulnerable people to navigate complex systems that are now overburdened due to a large influx of new claimants.⁴ We also understand that the application of sanctions and waiting times for first payments under the Universal Credit system can leave individuals with no financial resources for weeks at a time. Appealing decisions or correcting mistakes made through DWP systems is now more difficult than ever. Claiming benefits and updating personal details which may have changed since the outbreak, in order to maximise income, is also much easier for those who have digital access and can utilise online portals. This further shows the importance of combatting digital exclusion for the Care Experienced people and kinship carers we are currently supporting.

The most frequent financial challenges we have supported Care Experienced people and kinship carers to overcome are to meet food and energy costs. Many individuals contacting us are currently reliant on emergency food parcels, food banks or emergency funds to sustain themselves until their next payment from Universal Credit – this has been especially apparent for kinship carers and Care Experienced parents with young children. Issues with the quality of food available has also been highlighted, with a lack of fresh products being available and certain key items, such as baby food, being harder to source. We also understand that in some cases, the primary caregiver in a family has gone without food to ensure their children or dependents are fed.

The poverty experienced by many individuals in touch with us has been exacerbated by the expectation that people will be confined to their houses during lockdown measures, meaning higher utility costs. Financial challenges are also creating a build-up of multiple sources of debts and rent arrears for individuals and their families, with potential long-term negative consequences for financial stability.

Provision of care

The impact of Covid-19 on the care sector has been significant and cannot be overstated. This has ranged from a depleted workforce, due to shielding and self-isolation measures, to front-line care staff having to navigate difficult decision-making and practical complexity around how to keep children and themselves safe. The complicated nature of providing state care to children and young people means that general guidance has made it hard for the care sector to understand how to safely care for those they look after, while also respecting their wider human rights. This has proven especially difficult for front-line staff working in group living environments and we know there are children currently living in residential units with staff members that work in shift patterns and have to come and go from the premises on a regular basis, which creates concern of potential infection. The construct of providing residential care makes it extremely difficult for care staff to manage maintaining a caring and supportive household whilst protecting the children in their care and their workforce from the risks of Covid-19, which requires the implementation of guidance that restricts liberty and freedoms.

⁴ News item on UC new claimants: <https://www.gov.scot/news/additional-110-000-universal-credit-claims-since-coronavirus-outbreak/>

Demand for support and how to meet it

As an organisation, we have been able to identify key areas of demand for support for children and young people living in care and for vulnerable families made up of Care Experienced parents and kinship carers.

- **Access to digital technology.** We are consistently hearing issues from individuals who are unable to access the internet and/or make phone calls, and who may not own a working phone or have the technological hardware required. This has a variety of impacts: on the ability of children and young people to participate in formal processes now operating in digital spaces; in individuals being able to access information support online and especially for those navigating complex systems such as claiming Universal Credit.
- **Maintaining education for children in vulnerable families.** There is currently a lack of understanding of how children living in kinship care arrangements or with Care Experienced parents, can access the school places available for vulnerable families during the outbreak.
- **Crisis financial support.** There is significant financial challenge and experiences of poverty for many individuals contacting us, including those who are kinship carers and Care Experienced parents looking after children. Many have lost regular income or are experiencing unaffordable waiting periods until their next payment from Universal Credit, whilst the requirement to spend more time at home leads to increased financial burden.
- **Emotional support networks.** Individuals consistently tell us they do not know who to turn to for support and are struggling with the limited networks, especially now that family and friends are more difficult to connect with during lockdown. This is creating a substantial impact on the mental health of those with caring responsibilities and for children and young people living away from their families and loved ones.

However, we are keen not only to highlight to the Committee the current challenges faced by those we are supporting but also to identify how these demands could be met. We urge the committee to:

- Scrutinise how the Scottish Government's 'Connecting Scotland' project will be made available to all Care Experienced people, with a focus on Care Experienced parents and kinship carers, as well as children and young people currently in care. We ask that the impact of digital exclusion is understood as having the potential to erode human rights to participate in decision-making processes. It creates barriers for vulnerable people to access vital support, such as Universal Credit and other forms of support or information, which relies heavily on digital access.
- Consider how to ensure the education of children living in kinship care families or with potentially vulnerable Care Experienced parents can be prioritised during the remainder of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, how school places can be prioritised for these vulnerable families and also how practical support can be put in place so children can digitally access education opportunities if families feel at risk from sending their child to school, due to health concerns. Furthermore, consider the additional support that will need to be put in place for these children, so that

when schools return, they can resume their education with the relevant support already in place.

- Scrutinise and challenge the operation of Universal Credit, including the waiting period in place for the first payment of UC for new claimants. We would also recommend that the committee challenge the ethics of punitive decision-making on UC during the outbreak, as we understand that sanctions put in place are currently more difficult to appeal and are pushing individuals and their families further into poverty during this crisis. Explore how Social Security Scotland could function as a vital safety net for those impacted by the operation of DWP during this period, especially in their role as a Corporate Parent.
- Scrutinise the delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund by local authorities, to ensure administration of the fund is adjusted short-term to meet the unprecedented need of vulnerable families experiencing financial crisis during this period. Currently, we understand that local authority decision-making of how to distribute the fund can be restrictive and have evidence of individual applications being rejected due to a policy which limits each applicant to a maximum of 3 applications within a rolling 12 month period. Implementing an inflexible policy like this does not recognise the unprecedented nature of the financial impact on the most vulnerable families during the outbreak and we want to see the committee challenge all Welfare Fund assessments to be less punitive and more open to supporting all those that need it during Covid-19.
- Consider how lockdown measures could be adjusted for vulnerable families in specific cases, to combat the impact of mental health issues and a lack of support networks for those with parenting responsibilities. For example, we ask whether there is the possibility to allow single parents to follow the guidance given to separated parents with shared custody of a child but substitute a family member or friend in to help with childcare. This is particularly important for those without a separated partner providing joint parenting.

Should you wish to discuss the contents of this briefing, please contact:

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