

COVID-19 RECOVERY PLANNING

SUMMARY OF VIEWS FROM OUR CARE EXPERIENCED MEMBERSHIP

In 2020, Who Cares? Scotland launched the first [Annual Participation Programme](#) [the Programme.] The Programme creates spaces for participation and influencing which our Care Experienced members can take part in across the year. A calendar of themes are chosen from looking at our advocacy and participation work, and by looking at opportunities where we can influence change.

We want to make sure these three things happen when doing this work:

- 1. Members are connected to influencing opportunities**
- 2. Member experiences inform what we say out loud**
- 3. People in power hear what Care Experienced people have to say**

For our second theme, we focused on asking our members for their views on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives. This also created space for members to explore what recovery from the pandemic could look like and safely dive deeper into some of the challenges they have faced, to show how they could be better supported in future.

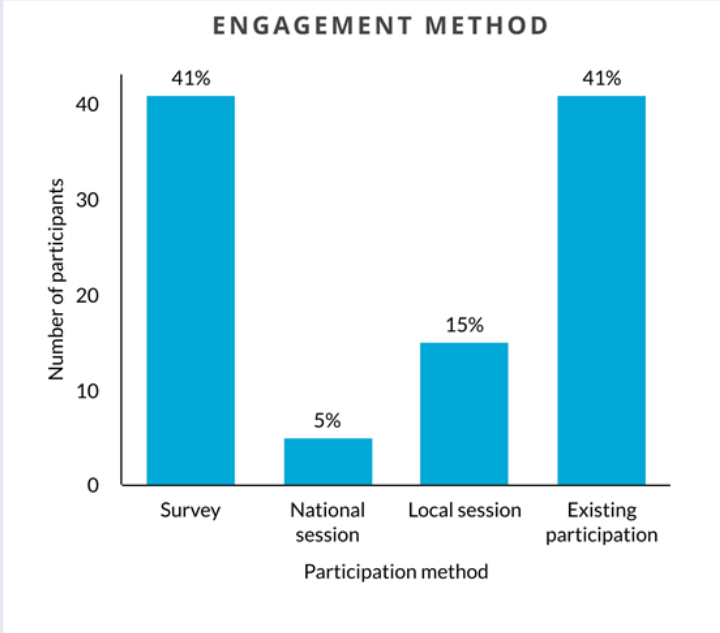
These participation opportunities were delivered at the end of 2020, when we were yet to experience the drastic changes caused by another severe wave of the pandemic. However, the evidence gathered remains relevant, as we see the vaccine roll-out and as decision-makers look to create a longer-term route map out of the pandemic in 2021.

HOW DID OUR MEMBERS ENGAGE WITH US?

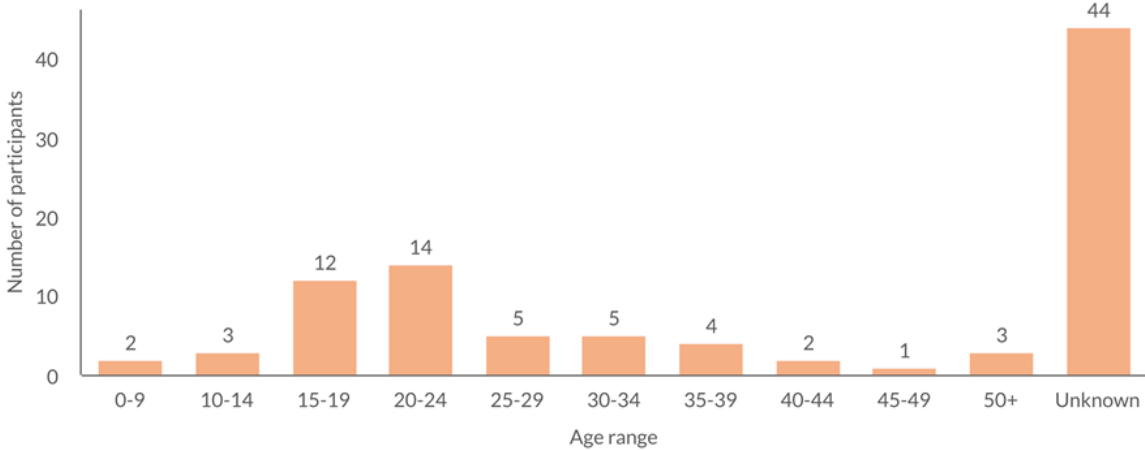
Total no. members informing report
95

No. members involved in new engagement
58

No. members submitting existing participation evidence
37



AGE OF PARTICIPANTS*



WHAT DID OUR MEMBERS TELL US?

REFLECTIONS ON THE PANDEMIC

Accessing and interpreting guidance

- The first period of the pandemic was confusing and anxiety-inducing for many, as services were unsure of how to respond to an unprecedented situation and communication felt unclear about how to apply the lockdown rules.
- Information about the lockdown was mainly accessed through social media and news on TV. However, members felt information could be difficult to understand and interpret.
- Members said that when lockdown started, they did not always know how to access support. However, later in the pandemic, they felt more confident of where to go for accurate information.

Barriers to information and understanding

- Whilst many people during the crisis could turn to friends and family as a source of support in coming to terms with the pandemic, Care Experienced members felt they sometimes did not have someone supportive in their life to turn to for guidance.
- Members shared how the constantly changing lockdown rules created issues with staying informed and being confident they were following the rules correctly. The communication style used to explain the pandemic and lockdown rules could feel complicated, with many members feeling that information should have been broken down in different ways.
- Digital exclusion was also identified as a significant barrier to accessing accurate, up-to-date information. Without access to the internet or news media, some Care Experienced people had to rely on social networks.

Applying lockdown guidance

- Some members told us that certain lockdown rules felt too restrictive for them to be able to realistically cope or were perceived as not a priority because of other competing concerns they were experiencing.
- The impact of loneliness and isolation was identified as a barrier to complying with lockdown rules.

→ Concerns were raised about the role of police enforcing lockdown rules and it was identified that the right support needed to be put in place for Care Experienced people in situations of vulnerability, for them to be able to safely apply the lockdown rules.

Accessing support

→ Care Experienced people shared how they have not been able to rely on friends, family, and wider informal support networks during the pandemic, meaning they often have to rely on care providers and statutory services to cope and seek support during the pandemic.

→ Members spoke positively about supportive professionals who had been a constant source of support, even just by maintaining a connection throughout the pandemic.

→ However, we also heard about the significant challenges of services being able to meet the existing and increased needs of many Care Experienced people. Many members said they were unhappy with the support available from professionals during lockdown and overall received less support.

→ When discussing coping with caring responsibilities, it was felt by many Care Experienced parents and/or carers that there was a real gap in support for them.

→ Members shared how, although support may be available, there can be stigma or perceptions around how a Care Experienced person may be perceived when asking for help as not being able to cope.

EVIDENCE OF PANDEMIC IMPACT

Wellbeing, mental and physical health

- Although there were some positives shared about life during the pandemic, the overwhelming sense for most members was that this had been a difficult and challenging time.
- Members consistently told us about the significant impact of loneliness and isolation they have experienced during the pandemic. This was often linked with a lack of consistent support networks, both personal and professional.
- Care Experienced people and carers also told us how they have struggled to cope with grief and bereavement and losing important relationships. With extra time at home, expressions of grief came to the fore.
- Members were clear that current mental health provision does not meet their needs and access to appropriate services has worsened during the pandemic. Many have struggled greatly with managing mental ill health.
- Although members spoke about positive changes to physical health, such as getting outdoors more, they experienced barriers to accessing health services during the pandemic.

Financial impact

- Many Care Experienced people who reached out to Who Cares? Scotland for support during the past year have experienced insecure employment and having to rely on social security systems for financial support.
- We recognise many Care Experienced people already faced challenging financial situations before the pandemic. Therefore, it has been unsurprising that the most common issues raised about finances have related to extreme food or fuel poverty.
- The complexity and difficulties with the social security process for individuals experiencing financial hardship has been evident throughout the pandemic, demonstrating need for longer-term change to social security systems.

Employment

- Access to stable employment has been another challenge for many Care Experienced people during the pandemic. We heard stories of unexpected

redundancies, with increasing unemployment leaving many to rely on the complex benefit system.

- We identified a lack of support for Care Experienced people made redundant during the pandemic, sometimes working in more insecure areas of employment.

Digital exclusion

- Digital exclusion has been experienced by many Care Experienced people and their families during the pandemic. Members reinforced how financially challenging it was for some Care Experienced people to access technology to remain connected and with updated information.
- Although digital access has been a lifeline for many Care Experienced people when many services and aspects of care were not possible to deliver in person, it is important that digital engagement does not replace the choice of how participation in meetings takes place and how relationships are maintained.

Education

- Online education and home learning has been very challenging for many Care Experienced people and their families. There were reports of varied levels and quality of support from schools to keep children connected with their education.
- Many Care Experienced parents and carers or parents of children in care were sometimes unaware of their entitlement to still access school places during the pandemic.

Living in care

- Members told us how lockdown rules impacted the way they could see their family. We heard about the negative impact of disrupted contact arrangements, including from the perspective of Care Experienced parents.
- Members shared how they felt different approaches were taken across local authority areas in how lockdown rules were interpreted, with some feeling a lack of control or choice in how they were applied. There were perceptions of 'blanket' policies being put in place in some care settings.
- It was identified that applying lockdown measures has been particularly difficult for those in group living environments.

→ Another impact for those living in care has been the potential challenges in transitioning between different types of care placement, or for some in returning home to live with family members.

Relationships

→ Members told us they had felt mostly disconnected from family and friends during the pandemic. Sometimes this was due to pre-existing issues with relationships, but often this was due to the new lockdown measures in place.

→ Members also shared how the pandemic could put strain on living with family members, or that living situations changed due to the nature of lockdown.

→ A resounding message we heard from members is how difficult it has been to cope with caring responsibilities during the pandemic. In particular, parenting during lockdown and managing caring for those with health conditions were identified as significantly challenging.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Understanding the pandemic

1. Clear information about the lockdown measures and ongoing state of the pandemic, including the roll-out of the vaccine, must be communicated in ways which young people and those with complex needs can understand and then apply in practice. This is particularly important in the communication of support available to them.
2. Information should be tailored for children and young people living in care and for care leavers, which includes specific local information.
3. Professionals and statutory services must pro-actively communicate changes in lockdown rules and check understanding for those they support and care for. This could include providing updates and interpretations of complex government information.

Applying lockdown rules

4. Flexibility and tailored guidance on lockdown restrictions must be available for Care Experienced people experiencing vulnerability and complex living situations, both as lockdown measures ease and for future potential lockdowns.
5. Police enforcing lockdown laws and measures must understand Care Experienced people's circumstances and context, especially in relation to young people potentially running away from care settings or breaking lockdown due to feeling isolated and lonely.

Access to support

6. Statutory support services and the care sector must prioritise Care Experienced people in the delivery of support and actively recognise the acute vulnerabilities associated with being less likely to have a support network of family. Members told us how the support they need can often be a point of human connection and conversation during the pandemic, rather than always being task focused.
7. We want to see pro-active support offers being created to mitigate the many negative impacts of living through the pandemic for Care Experienced people. There must be recognition that putting the burden of responsibility to ask for support on an individual struggling can be a barrier – due to the stigma and shame that can be associated with needing to ask for help, particularly for carers and parents.

Wellbeing, mental and physical health

8. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of Care Experienced people is a serious ongoing issue, with long-term consequences beyond the easing of lockdown. Care Experienced people of all ages must be prioritised in the provision of mental health services at all levels.
9. Further development is needed for tailored mental health services for Care Experienced people. We have provided a bespoke counselling service throughout the pandemic, which has shown the benefits of a choice-led model of counselling support. Recovery from the pandemic must be an opportunity to understand fully the needs of the Care Experienced community in relation to their mental health and in the designing and funding of current and future services to meet those needs.
10. Members want to see continued support and checking in from support staff, carers and services – if they want this. As soon as possible, physical delivery of support and care must be put back in place and this should be prioritised for Care Experienced people of all ages in the easing of lockdown. This is vital to avoid further loneliness and isolation.

Financial impact

11. There must be increased financial support available long-term to combat the limitations of the UK social security system, helping Care Experienced individuals and families in poverty to cope better with the impact of Covid-19.
12. Continued effort is needed to ensure clear communication around how to access financial assistance for both those in receipt of statutory support and those 'on the edge' of receiving it.
13. Long-term commitment is required from Scottish Government to protect those experiencing new or rising debt, especially for those at risk of losing housing because of the financial impact of Covid-19.

Employment

14. The impact of unemployment has been significant for Care Experienced people who have contacted us, and this must be recognised at a national level. Long-term, targeted support is required to support Care Experienced people of all ages to find secure, stable employment opportunities which suit their interests and capabilities.

15. We also recognise that employment support needs to go beyond supporting Care Experienced people to secure a stable and suitable job role. Support must also include training opportunities for individuals to enhance their skills and access a wider variety of career options. We must also ensure that Care Experienced people can access secure jobs which pay the Living Wage, due to the very real threat of in-work poverty.

Digital exclusion

16. We welcome the existing efforts to provide digital technology to care leavers. However, we would like to see a longer-term plan laid out to address how future care leavers are prevented from digital exclusion. Moving forward, we want to see access to digital technology and the internet recognised as a fundamental part of wellbeing assessments and as an essential requirement for all Care Experienced people living in care and as care leavers. This must include support to learn how to use technology.

Education

17. We want to see more targeted funding and support to make sure that all children in care are not further disadvantaged by the closure of schools. This support must be open for Care Experienced parents to access for their own children, if required.
18. In case of future lockdowns causing school closures, a more robust approach must be developed to ensure that Care Experienced parents and the parents and carers of children in care are fully made aware of their entitlement to a place in school.
19. We want to see additional, targeted financial support continue to be provided at both further and higher levels of education, as we understand that the pandemic will have long-term financial consequences for many Care Experienced students. There must be recognition that the end of the pandemic will not resolve the financial insecurity for many students. It is also vital that any additional financial support does not exclude individuals from other types of statutory support available, such as Universal Credit.
20. Education institutions must ensure that Care Experienced children, young people, and adults have digital access and internet connection and provide means to purchase equipment as needed. This should be a core part of

delivering education services in Scotland, as this greatly impacts the ability for students to succeed.

Living in care

- 21.** Information that is specific to care settings, such as secure and residential care environments, must continue to be updated with robust guidelines and actions which can ensure the highest quality of living is achieved whilst keeping people safe. This must continue to be a tailored approach for individual children in care, which prioritises their best interests and individual needs.
- 22.** We need commitment to scrutinise how transitions for children and young people in care have been managed during Covid-19. This will ensure that when lockdown is eased long-term, that children and young people in care or who have recently left can be supported to live where is best for them.
- 23.** Members have told us they want to be involved in decisions made about their care during the pandemic. Even when this is more difficult in lockdown, it is vital to communicate with the person being cared for and not just their care givers. Formal meetings, such as Children's Hearings, must prioritise the participation of children and young people in the recovery of physical meetings as we transition out of lockdown. Care experienced people must be involved in the planning of their care and understand the changes which will be made to their lives in recovery from Covid-19.
- 24.** The distinct impact of living in residential care during the pandemic has been evident for many children and young people in care. Due to the nature of group-living environments, extra precautions have been needed, such as staff wearing personal protective equipment. This has made the pandemic inescapable for many children in care and has fundamentally changed their home environment.

Relationships and caring responsibilities

- 25.** Resuming and continuing to provide quality time with family members and loved ones for children in care must be a priority in the easing of restrictions. We have welcomed the leadership of the Scottish Government in publishing guidance on family contact for looked after children and want to make sure this continues with the eventual easing of restrictions.
- 26.** Care Experienced parents and carers of Care Experienced children are often still struggling with extreme forms of hardship. The almost year-long pandemic

has taken a huge toll on families experiencing any kind of vulnerability, who have been living almost entirely without support networks and childcare. Targeted support should be provided for Care Experienced parents both financially and in recognition of them as a priority group for childcare and education services as lockdown eases.

WHAT NEXT?

Who Cares? Scotland will use these findings to make sure decision makers understand what our members have said about the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, we will make sure this evidence influences Scottish Government decision making and any further work undertaken by the Scottish Parliament to scrutinise the handling and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

You can also use this report to influence understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Care Experienced people and how we can create plans for recovery.

If you would like to discuss this work, please get in touch:

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