

**A LIFETIME OF  
EQUALITY,  
RESPECT  
AND  
LOVE**



**FOR CARE EXPERIENCED PEOPLE**

# **COVID-19 RECOVERY PLANNING**

**VIEWS FROM OUR CARE EXPERIENCED  
MEMBERSHIP**

**FEBRUARY 2021**

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## WHY DID WE DO THIS?

During the past year, a global pandemic has changed everyday life as we know it and has impacted every individual in society. Who Cares? Scotland has supported many in the Care Experienced community through this unprecedented situation and has witnessed the significant impact that Covid-19 has had, and continues to have, on many Care Experienced people's lives. For members of the Care Experienced community who have contacted Who Cares? Scotland for support during Covid-19, the organisation has been able to provide immediate emotional, practical, or financial remedy. However, we recognised that the complex nature of the issues raised presents systemic issues in the systems around care and with the response to the pandemic.

We identified the need to further understand the impact of the pandemic from the perspective of our Care Experienced members and created participation opportunities as part of our [Annual Participation Programme](#), to explore the wider implications of this life-changing event. This 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. As part of this work, we also encouraged local existing participation groups to send us their thoughts and pre-existing work about the pandemic – for example, a report on Care Experienced people's views and experiences of Covid-19 in Aberdeen was shared with us.<sup>1</sup>

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, 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.

We want to make sure Care Experienced people's concerns and experiences are fully understood, heard, and considered when shaping the nation's response. To understand more about our Annual Participation Programme, the participation methodology we used and how Care Experienced members can be involved in future opportunities, [please see information on our website here](#).

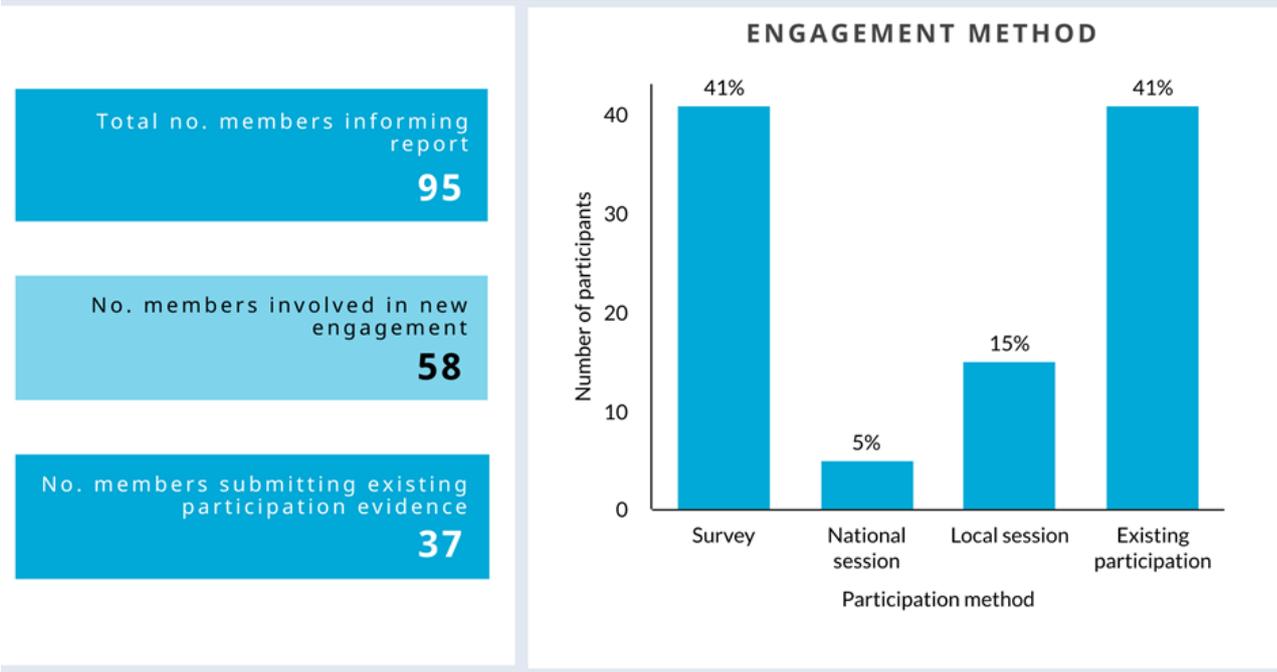
Throughout this paper, we explore the issues experienced by Care Experienced people during the pandemic. These demonstrate both the challenges faced by the care sector in applying general guidance to a complex system and the profound impacts

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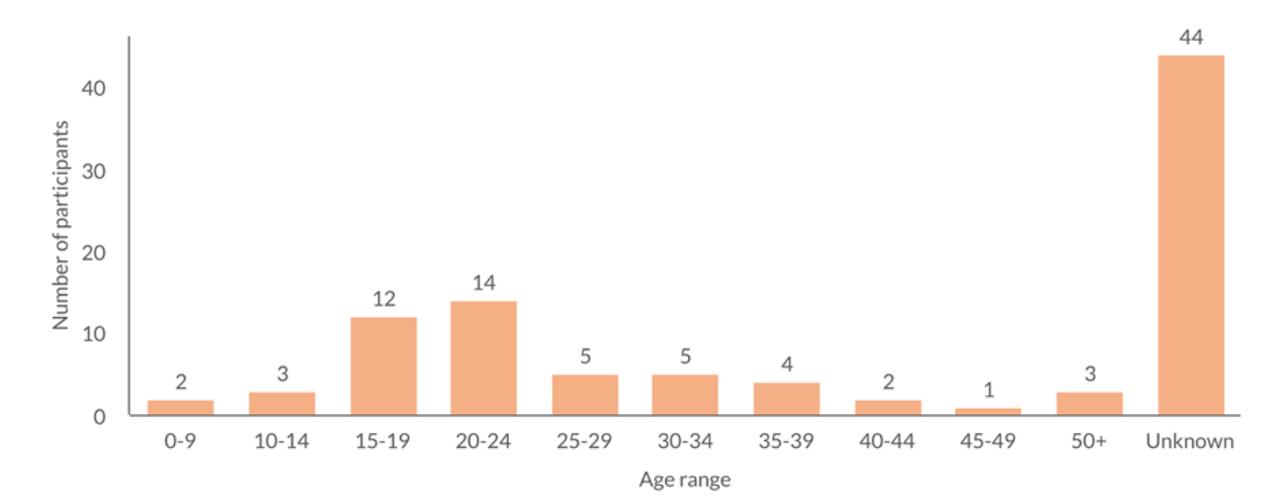
<sup>1</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, August 2020, Impact of Lockdown on Care Experienced young people in Aberdeen](#)

of being less likely to have the support networks of family in place. It also shows in more detail, that there are very real challenges in upholding human rights for Care Experienced people during such a crisis.

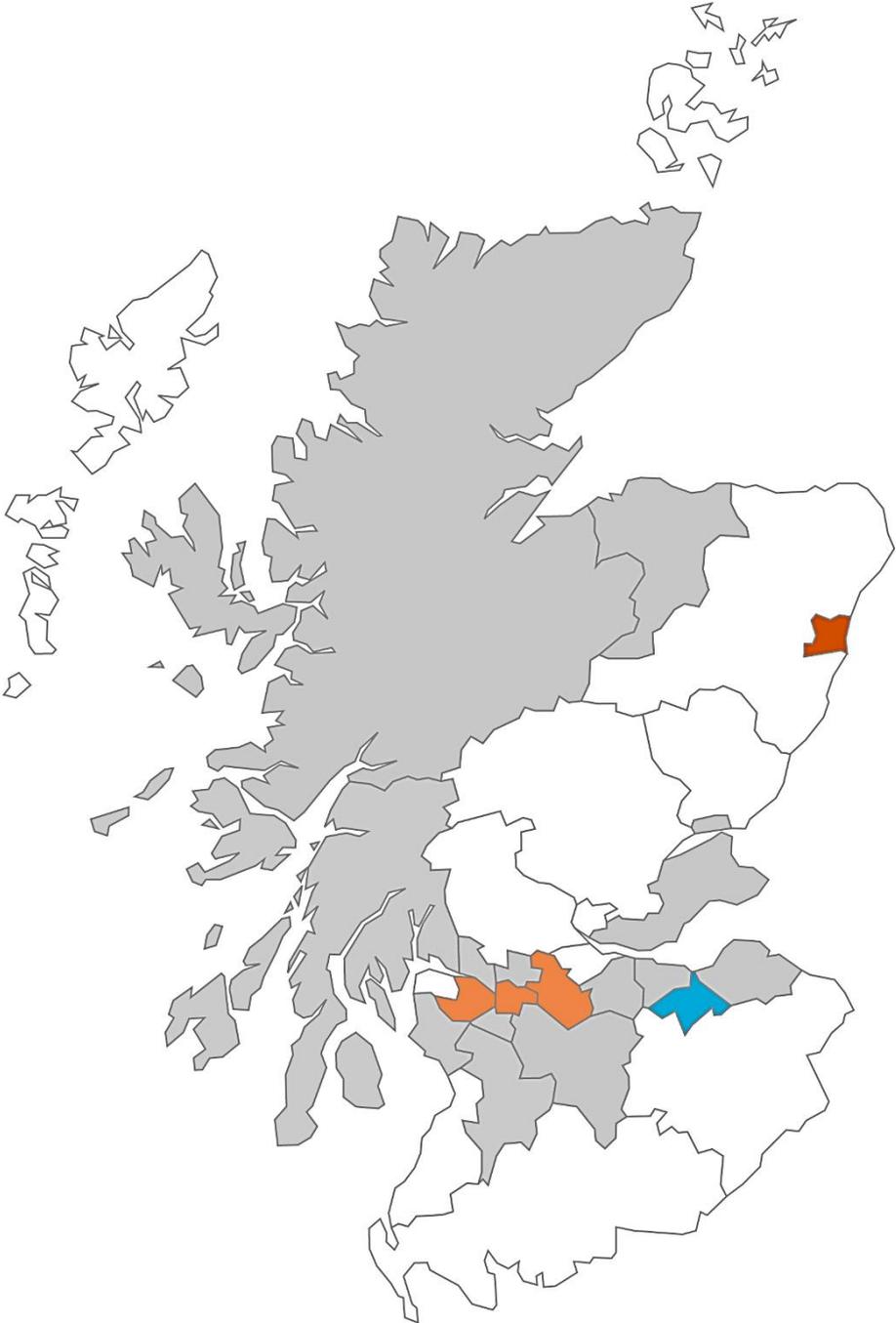
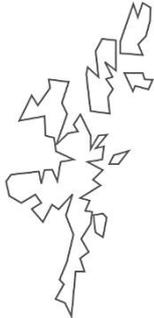
### WHO TOOK PART?



### AGE OF PARTICIPANTS\*



**LOCAL AUTHORITY AREA**



## 1. REFLECTIONS ON PANDEMIC MEASURES

When thinking about the impact of the pandemic on Care Experienced people's lives, we wanted to create the opportunity for members of Who Cares? Scotland to tell us about their experiences of the lockdown measures brought in by the UK and Scottish Governments. This section covers reflections shared through our participation work, on how the lockdown rules were communicated, understood, and applied to Care Experienced people's lives in practice. Included in this are the reflections shared from members about how lockdown measures changed the way support services were delivered and accessed.

### ACCESSING AND INTERPRETING GUIDANCE

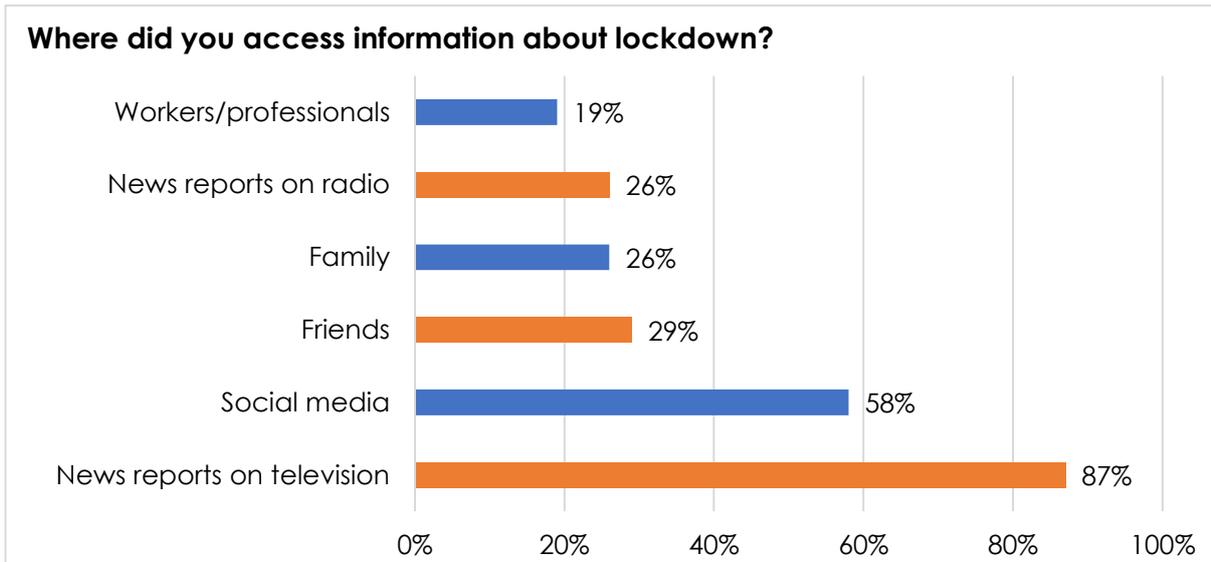
Members reflected on how confusing and anxiety-inducing the first period of the pandemic was, as services were unsure of how to respond to an unprecedented situation and communication felt unclear about how to apply the rules to their own lives.

*'I didn't understand fully, not the way I know how it is now.'*

*'Felt the information at the beginning was rubbish.'*

A report created from the views of young Care Experienced members from Aberdeen reflected that *'although things stabilised slowly throughout the crisis, it commenced in a state of near panic for many young people and no one was able to provide them with any clear direction.'*

In terms of accessing information about the lockdown, there was a sense that individuals knew something concerning was happening, with news reports often being sensationalist and creating a sense of panic, but without initial guidance on what they should be doing and how to access support. Information about the changing situation slowly trickled to some individuals through social networks and word of mouth, especially as public places started to close as part of lockdown measures.



Most members relied on news reports on TV, social media, and specific websites to keep updated on the changing rules and risks. The daily government briefings available on different media platforms, once introduced, were also valued by some members. Letters from the Scottish Government were also commented on as a helpful source of information, especially for those needing to shield.

Members also spoke about how confident they felt in understanding what to do with this information in practice. For many, the information being communicated was confusing and some Care Experienced people have felt unsure of where to go for accurate information about lockdown.

*'I understood that it was to keep everyone safe and that's why we were staying inside. I didn't understand why we weren't able to see our family. It made sense when I started watching the news.'*

*'I understand the information then suddenly they change it and I need to learn a new system. It gets really confusing.'*

Professionals, friends, family members and carers who were supportive and helped to explain information about the lockdown were also identified as important in accessing information.

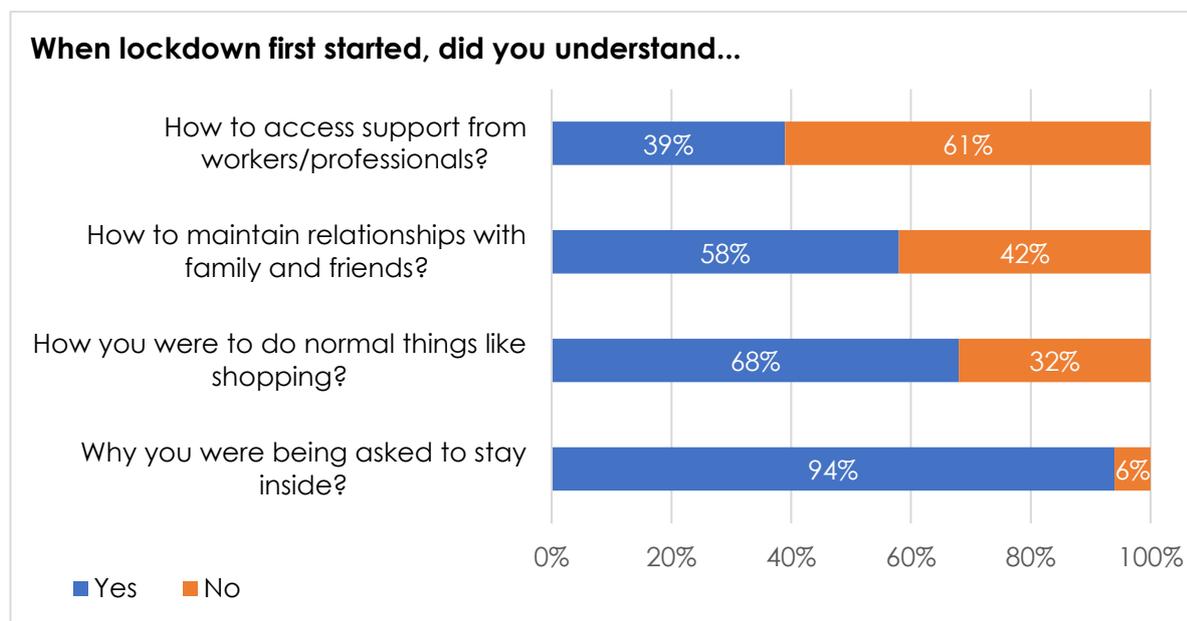
*'My support was very helpful to me. Explained the restrictions to me.'*

*'My sister kept me informed.'*

*'I was too paranoid to go out, my granny helped me understand how to stay safe outside and how often to wash my hands.'*

Members who were actively connected with local Who Cares? Scotland work also commented that champions boards had been a helpful source of information.

We asked members to tell us in more detail what they did or did not understand about lockdown when it first started. The results were mixed, with a particularly concerning lack of understanding of how to access support.



Although members made it clear how difficult it was to know where to go for information at the start of the pandemic and to understand what to do, it was positive that when answering the survey question: **'Do you feel confident knowing where to go to get information about what you should and shouldn't be doing during the Covid-19 pandemic?'** 58% of participants answered 'Yes'. This could reflect that at the time of surveying in October/November 2020, it was over 6 months since the start of the pandemic.

### **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 explained they sometimes felt they did not have someone supportive in their life to turn to for guidance:

*'No one knows what to do, no one can tell me what I'm meant to do!'*

*'I don't know what to do or where to go.'*

In a report of experiences of the lockdown in Aberdeen, it was noted that: *'During the early stages of the crisis and restrictions of lockdown, young people said that they did*

*not know what to do and that there was no one to talk to about their issues, questions or to simply seek any direction. This only lead to further anxiety and exacerbating existing mental and physical health issues for young people.'*

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:

*'I prefer and find it easier to understand when its underlined and explained better as I find it hard to understand.'*

*'Young Scot have the friendly version of the briefing which makes it easier to look at that one as it's more broken down. Rather than the jargon script the SG put out.'*

The high volume of updates was also commented on as a barrier to understanding, with some feeling anxious from seeing constant warnings on the news. Some reflected on how they chose to use sources like social media for updates, where the amount of content consumed could be more easily controlled. There was a sense of needing to know the facts but also not wanting to focus on the pandemic constantly, to protect mental health and wellbeing:

*'I still to this day find the news extremely repetitive. I kind of stopped listening. Information overload.'*

*'I try to not read up on it as it increases my anxiety, I have just started getting it under control.'*

Members also reflected on how their lack of trust in reporting by the media impacted whether they listened to news about the pandemic:

*'The news isn't helpful as they twist all the information.'*

*'The sensationalism. It's a scare mongering tactic. I do not have faith in British media, they say it isn't political, but it clearly is.'*

It was also identified that the distinction between the U.K. and Scottish Government's responses made communication about the lockdown hard to understand, especially when policy responses diverged:

*'UK govt has been awful. Lots of mixed messaging. Confused between UK messaging and Scottish messaging. Which one do I follow?'*

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 word of mouth and social networks. This sparked discussion about how the communication methods used by the Scottish and UK governments heavily relied on individuals having access to the internet and the daily briefings on TV:

*'Lots of YP in homeless don't have access to Internet so got the information from friends or people living in rooms next door and were very at risk because of this. They don't think to watch the briefings, these young people can normally be hard to reach and it's been harder since lockdown.'*

One member also shared that they felt the response to the pandemic had significant gaps for certain groups in the way lockdown rules were created and communicated:

*'The only thing I am annoyed about is that Scottish govt have not thought about people with disabilities. Been so focused on other stuff and not how people with learning difficulties are affected.'*

## **APPLYING LOCKDOWN GUIDANCE**

We explored with members how they felt about applying the lockdown rules to their own lives. Some 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:

*'They have bigger things to worry about they have day to day survival to think about they don't care if they need to wear a mask on a bus or not, they are dealing with a lot of other things.'*

*'I can't go anywhere with my friends or have any hobbies. Because of this I ended up breaking lockdown rules by staying with a friend sometimes- this just gave me serious anxiety that I would get a fine or worse.'*

*'Was so pissed off – can't see family and friends, did not care so I ran away a couple of times.'*

In Aberdeen, support staff shared that they saw how loneliness and isolation of Care Experienced young people during lockdown led to *'behaviours that place young people at greater risk of police involvement and breaking new rules, such as gathering*

*in groups, attending parties etc.'* This was also commented on by one member in relation to residential care:

*'Most of the residential have said all contact has to be virtual because of the risk which will affect the young people, this increases young people running away and taking high risks.'*

There were also concerns about how Police could be involved in enforcing lockdown rules: *'Young people have found themselves easily in conflict with new laws and process related to social distancing and gatherings. While reports of fines are few, and there has been no information provided related to any arrests (this does not mean they have not occurred, just that we are not aware of any), young people have found this to be an issue for them and one they are concerned about.'*

One Care Experienced member reflected on the judgement they faced from members of the public when they were perceived to be doing the wrong thing during lockdown when going food shopping with their children:

*'Going to the shops was awful, I had to take four kids shopping or leave them in the house against the law since none of them are old enough to take care of themselves or each other or I would face abuse for taken the kids to the shops. Having my mother there didn't help - I was put into care for a reason.'*

In relation to following the lockdown rules, some members also spoke about how difficult it could be when others they were close to did not fully understand them:

*'My 9-year-old brother just doesn't understand all the rules. It's so hard.'*

*'My gran keeps inviting us in but we just need to keep explaining that we can't because we want to keep her safe.'*

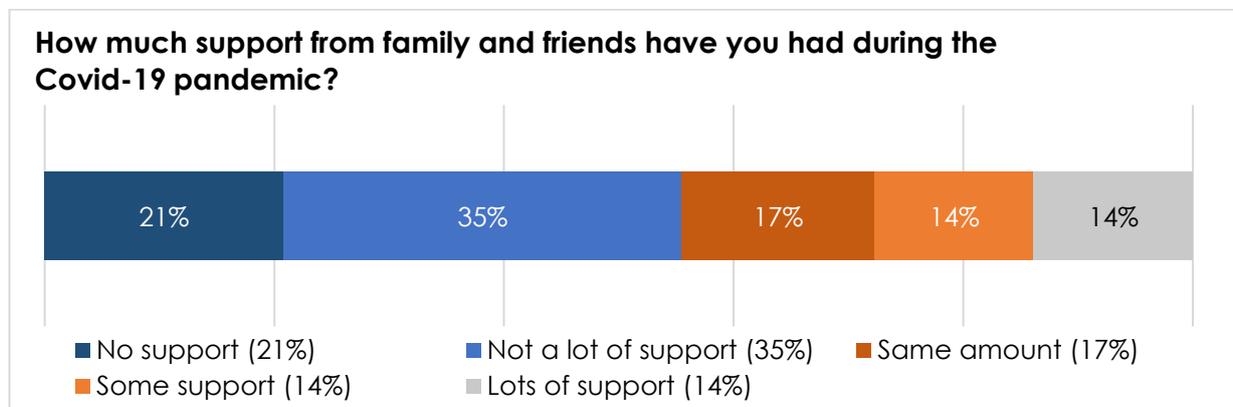
One member also made the point that they felt the lockdown rules did not apply to everyone, which felt unfair:

*'I don't think when MPs and politicians were breaking the rules that it helped people complying, creates power imbalance. If the general public did anything like this then we get fines, put in jail.'*

An important theme from responses was 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

Many Care Experienced people shared how they have not been able to rely on friends, family, and wider informal support networks during the pandemic. This was reflected in the response to our online survey question:



This means Care Experienced people often rely on care providers and statutory services to cope and seek support during the pandemic. We know first-hand the hard work taking place to keep support available for those who need it most. However, we know there have been significant challenges for services to meet the new and existing demand for support, especially for individuals experiencing vulnerability during the pandemic.

Many members reflected on how they felt support staff and professionals in their lives positively provided sources of support during the lockdown, often in new ways due to the restrictions:

*'My social worker has been really good as she has been checking in to make sure I was fine.'*

*'Scottish commission of learning disabilities have been brilliant for keeping in touch with community. We can call them and just chat about their day. I can talk to them every day and it really cheers me up!'*

*'Getting a delivery of care packages made me feel good.'*

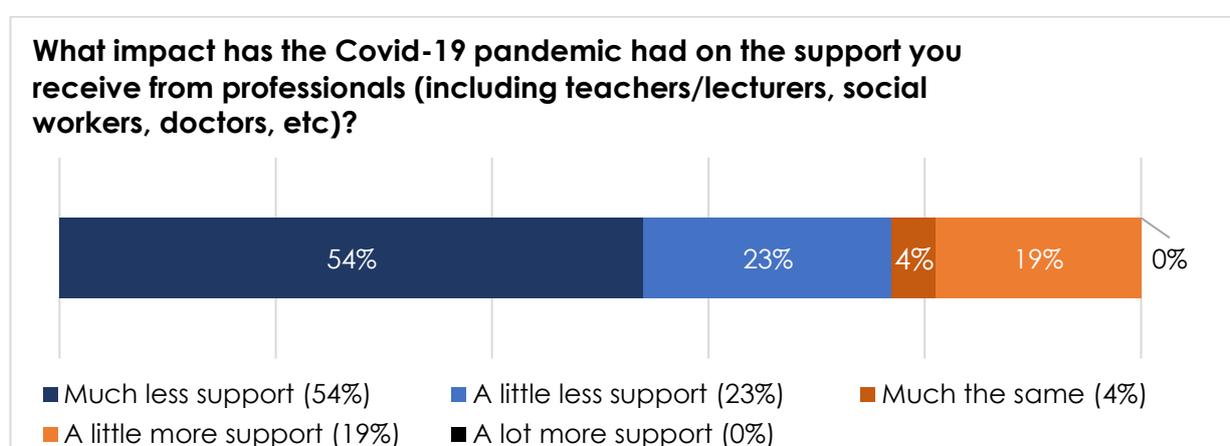
*'Many workers from a range of services spent weeks following up young people individually, to ensure that they were okay. Food parcels were made up and delivered. Who Cares? Scotland was granted funds to distribute for emergency aid (rent, food gas and electric mostly), Council staff worked individually with young people to assist in a range of areas as well.'*

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

*'Just talking to (Youth Team worker) about ordinary things was really nice.'*

There were also reflections about how new or extended support suddenly became available during the pandemic, for example through increased hardship funds.

Later in this report there is detailed information about the specific barriers to mental and physical health services. In addition, members reflected on several sources of support which have been impacted during the pandemic. Overall, members felt less supported by professionals during the pandemic:



Additionally, in response to the question: **'Are you happy with the support available from professionals during lockdown?'** in our online survey, 73% of participants answered 'No'. Members shared details about a variety of essential services that they had issues accessing, for example getting appointments with GPs, obtaining legal advice and representation, consistent support from social work and difficulties with support staff not being able to physically visit them.

A report of experiences of the pandemic in Aberdeen reflected that at the start of the pandemic: *'Public services were largely uncontactable, and contact had reduced throughout that week meaning that questions related to Universal Credit, or housing would remain unanswered and young people did not know who to contact.'* Another member echoed this message that they felt the local authority were initially slow to respond:

*'LA should have done more. At the beginning they were not allowed to use technology to contact families as it was counting as contact which was not the case before the pandemic.'*

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. This is covered in more detail in the section of the report detailing the impact of the pandemic. However, there was an important reflection from members about a perception that being offered support can potentially be viewed by an individual as a judgement of them being unable to cope:

*'Been getting patronising phone calls from the school about being a single parent when I have been doing above and beyond for my kids.'*

One member also reflected that although they knew support was available, it could still feel hard to reach out:

*'I know I can phone (my worker) but they have more important things to deal with...I'm only feeling scared.'*

This is an important theme from discussion, as although support may be available, there can be stigma or perceptions around how a Care Experienced person may be perceived when asking for help.

## 2. SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE OF PANDEMIC IMPACT

Living through the pandemic and under lockdown measures during the past year has had significant impacts on Care Experienced people's lives. Throughout this time, we have continued to support Care Experienced people with our independent advocacy services, employment support and in online participation spaces. In March 2020, a specialised helpline for Care Experienced people was created as an additional offer from the organisation. This initially operated as an advice service, but with the additional ability to support callers with access to short-term financial support. [The helpline continues to operate](#) today as a point of contact for Care Experienced people to seek advice and for signposting to relevant services.

This section summarises the different types of impacts the pandemic has had on Care Experienced people's lives. It contains direct views given by members during our Annual Participation Programme activity focusing on exploring recovery from Covid-19, where they could safely explore how the pandemic has impacted them in more detail. Alongside this, different sources of evidence Who Cares? Scotland has gathered during the pandemic have informed this section of the report. This includes information from [two impact reports](#) created in 2020, which provide a snapshot of the start of the pandemic as we went through a major adjustment period and had to ensure basic needs were met. This section is also informed by more recent evidence from our ongoing helpline offer and organisational activity throughout 2020 and into early 2021. Each theme is linked with an international human rights framework demonstrating the very real challenges in upholding the human rights of Care Experienced people during the pandemic.



## Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

## WELLBEING, MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

### WELLBEING

Members told us how their lives changed during the pandemic and how this felt. Some spoke about the positives they experienced, like seeing friends and family online, continuing to exercise, get outdoors more and do sport when they could:

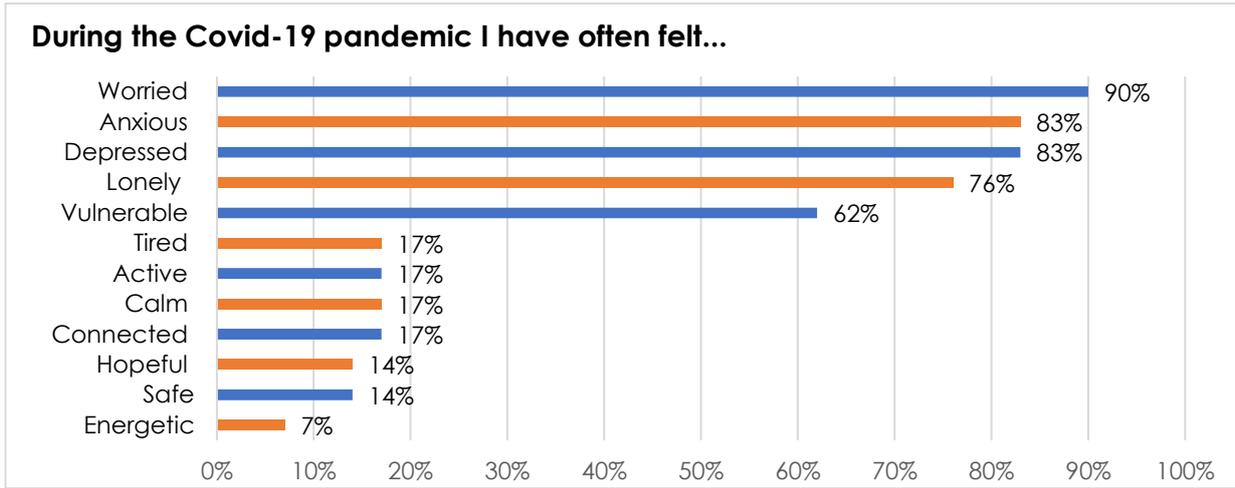
*'Making new friends, going to new groups. I have been exploring different things. I know we will not be in this forever.'*

*'I learned to appreciate my life and being able to see friends when we were allowed, I feel we took it for granted.'*

The pandemic was also seen to create an openness for people to talk about how they were feeling: *'It has created space for everyone to open and honest and say I'm OK or I'm not OK.'* Others spoke about hobbies they had continued to enjoy or new skills they had learned, from escaping into a good book, to getting more involved with politics and online events with organisation they care about, including opportunities to volunteer more.

As much as 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, with many negative impacts on their lives: *'I have tried to fill my time to keep me busy because it's been hard not having routine.'*

Many members reflected on what they missed, including time with friends, playing certain sports, attending social activities and big events in person: *'We took cuddles and contact for granted.'* The overall negative impact of the pandemic is clear from the answers given by Care Experienced members when asked how they had been feeling:



Members have consistently told us about the significant impact of loneliness and isolation they have experienced during the pandemic: *'I've been so sad and lonely, and there is no one to just give me a hug.'*

A pattern emerged of describing the lack of consistent support networks, both personal and professional, which could lead to feeling alone:

*A Care Experienced young person who has recently moved into their own accommodation after a placement breakdown, just prior to isolation measures, reports of feeling alone incredibly isolated in the new accommodation and unsure how to pay bills. Referrals for support from agencies are now paused due to the pandemic, leaving them isolated and with no direct help. <sup>2</sup>*

The mental health implications of loneliness and isolation have been profound, and many members described the impacts of losing the ability to connect with others.

*'This situation has really made me realise how alone I am in the world, and how I don't have the same supports and structures that a lot of other people have.'*

Care Experienced people and carers also told us how they have struggled to cope with the grief of bereavement and losing important relationships, and with extra time at home, expressions of grief came to the fore:

*A young Care Experienced person who very recently left care is struggling with the loss of a close friend, a short time before lockdown. They currently live in temporary homeless accommodation and although they have a high level of good support from*

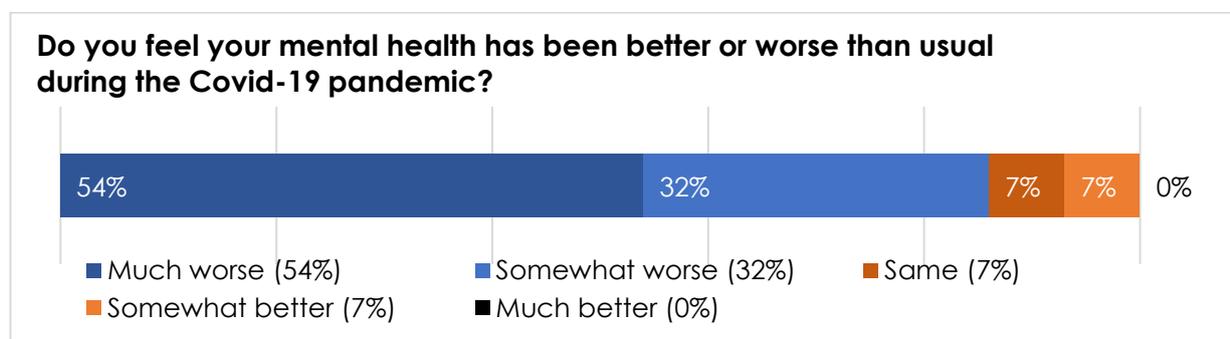
<sup>2</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, April 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

*their throughcare worker, they are faced with the impact of grief while having little in the way of coping mechanisms.*<sup>3</sup>

Calls to our helpline reveal ongoing evidence of isolation for the Care Experienced community, with a need for connection. For some, the expression of the isolation they face was explicit in their presentation of the issues they required help with, noting a lack of family, friendship, or professional supports they can access.

## MENTAL HEALTH

It is concerning that over half of members who responded to our online survey judged their mental health to be 'much worse' during the pandemic, including descriptions of mental ill health, self-harm and feeling suicidal.



Members have told us about the difficult challenges with their mental health that they have had to cope with throughout lockdown:

*'It's gotten worse as I haven't been able to do all the things I normally do. I miss hugging people. Mental health is linked with seeing other people.'*

Large numbers of Care Experienced people contacting Who Cares? Scotland for support have spoken about the impact that social-distancing and the fear of the unknown future has had on their mental wellbeing. We also heard about difficulties with accessing appropriate support for mental health:

*A Care Experienced young person with pre-existing mental health issues is due to be released from hospital while the Covid-19 social distancing measures are in place. Their support worker, who they have a positive relationship with, has been told to isolate for 12 weeks and so they will now receive a form of support from a different worker. This change in support, alongside the challenge of being released from hospital during the crisis, is causing significant impact on their mental health.*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

This change in support was echoed by members sharing their experiences in participation spaces, who told us how lockdown restrictions changed existing support:

*'My mental health has decreased majorly because I had just started my new medication and I haven't had a proper review with my psychiatric doctor since.'*

*'Before the pandemic I was undergoing support groups for my anxiety and now with the pandemic I can't go and grow as a person and help my anxiety because I am stuck inside.'*

Many members spoke about the fact they had pre-existing mental health issues, which were made worse during the pandemic: *'I have struggled with mental health and depression just no which started at the time of lockdown, I have anxiety.'*

In Aberdeen it was reflected that: *'they also have other mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD that young people also report were made worse by the isolation and shielding. This was also not assisted by ongoing reports in mainstream media and social media of high mortality rates, death and a general sense of things being out of control.'*

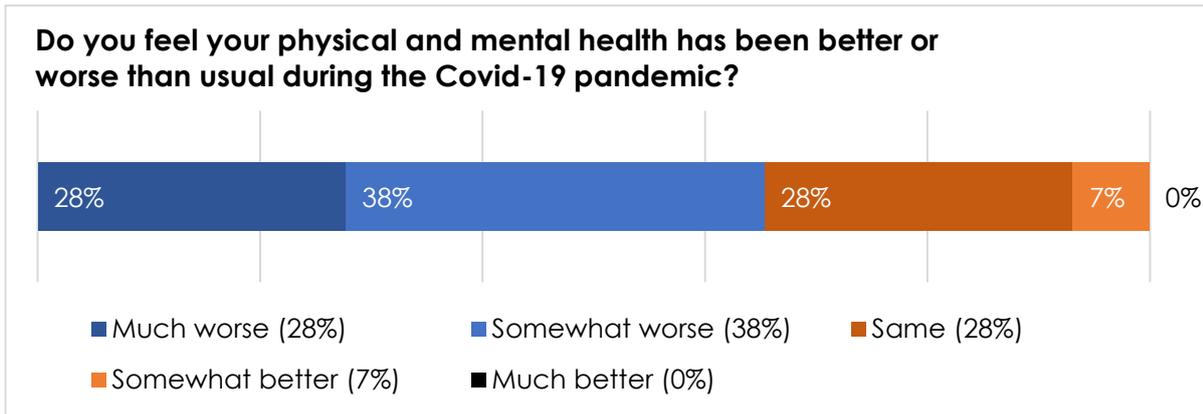
It was also difficult for members to see others struggle with mental health: *'My brother has mental health issues and really struggled during lockdown when he was off work and it impacted his mental health.'*

A Care Experienced parent with caring responsibilities described the barriers to being able to look after their mental health: *'I did so many self-care things before, which was having time alone... now having the kids home or even at school it's hard because they can't regulate their emotions and I can't seem to regulate my own. Not having time for myself.'*

One member did reflect that lockdown had led to them receiving mental health support for the first time: *'Got diagnosed with my mental health and doctors and mental health professionals finally listened.'*

## **PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Members told us their physical health had largely become worse during the pandemic. However, this was judged as less severe than the impact on their mental health:



Some members did share positive impacts to their physical health they experienced, such as eating healthier or getting more active or being outdoors. However, we mostly heard negative reflections about members' physical health, which were often linked to ongoing or new mental health struggles:

*'Lockdown made me smoke and drink more because of stress levels rocketing.'*

*'All I felt I could really do was eat (and have definitely developed an eating disorder as a result) ... Physically I've gained between 3 and 4 stone, I'm not active anymore. None of my clothes fit me and I have no money for new ones- it sounds stupid but that then plays into negative mental health responses because I feel rubbish about myself.'*

More experiences about the barriers to accessing support services for physical health issues were also shared:

*'I've been waiting since February for a consultation and possibly surgery and diagnosis since February due to potentially having Crohn's. I'm in a lot of pain. Struggling to get out of bed in the morning. I'm exhausted most of the time and receiving no support or medication.'*

*'I think particular services, such as GP practices, dental services have been less accessible. There has been limited information about services and new systems implemented that can be complicated and time consuming to access. I've been less likely to prioritise my health needs due to this.'*

Caring responsibilities were also identified as a barrier to keeping physically healthy:

*'Physical health has been much worse, going out is a mission as I have 4 of them to get ready. They are stuck in the house together they don't want to exercise together which has meant lots of arguing.'*



## Article 22, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

### 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. As lockdown measures became more restrictive, Care Experienced people increasingly struggled. Many Care Experienced people have told us about the hardship they have faced:

*A young Care Experienced parent cannot afford to maintain their energy payments. Both their washing machine and fridge freezer have broken. With social distancing they are unable to lean on their networks and as a result they are experiencing significant challenge in feeding and clothing their children, as well as heating their house.<sup>5</sup>*

*A kinship carer who is shielding due to health concerns, is struggling with the additional costs associated with lockdown. They have limited financial support as Child Benefit payments are still being provided to the child's parent and they are not in receipt of kinship care allowance. The rise in energy costs due to remaining permanently in the home is proving challenging and they are completely reliant on friends and family to deliver food when possible. With the extra money being spent on bills, they are unable to buy enough food, nor are they able to buy materials and toys to keep the child occupied and engaged.<sup>6</sup>*

We recognise many Care Experienced people already faced challenging financial situations before the pandemic. Therefore, it has been unsurprising that the most common issue brought to our helpline has been related to finances, often in relation to extreme food or fuel poverty. Many of these have related to accessing social security and navigating systems such as Universal Credit, with some experiencing a lack of income due to punitive sanctions. We have also supported Care Experienced people

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<sup>5</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, April 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

to speak to energy providers and we also helped find ways to cover funeral costs for family members.

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:

*A young man struggling with Universal Credit payments called the helpline for advice. He informed the helpline staff that there had been an error in his application for UC and he had been without payment for 5 weeks. He had been informed by DWP to make another claim but was now concerned that he would have to wait considerably longer because receiving payment. We supported the young man to speak to DWP and he received payment 3 days later.*



## Article 23, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

### EMPLOYMENT

Access to stable employment has been another challenge for many Care Experienced people during the pandemic. During this initial period, the organisation heard stories of unexpected redundancies, with increasing unemployment leaving many to rely on the complex benefit system. This was identified as causing further stigmatisation and a sense of shame. Zero-hour contracts, while initially providing some level of certainty, increasingly left some Care Experienced people facing an unknown future early in the pandemic:

*A young person who lost their job at the start of the social distancing measures has no money to pay for food, electricity or other bills. Their partner is pregnant, and they are concerned about how to exist safely with no heating or food. They have applied for Universal Credit but are having technical issues accessing their account. As a result, they will not receive payment for another 2 weeks.<sup>7</sup>*

We have identified a lack of support for Care Experienced people made redundant during the pandemic, sometimes working in more insecure areas of employment. The response from the Scottish Government has been that individuals can access Universal Credit if they find themselves suddenly out of work:

A young Care Experienced person who recently left care reports that they feel overwhelmed by the Universal Credit Claim procedure. They are currently employed with a zero-hour contract and they have been waiting for confirmation from their employer about furlough options. They have been searching for another job during this time but feel limited as most employment options are for care workers. They believe that their criminal history would prevent them from accessing such options. They are in

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<sup>7</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, April 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

a significant amount of debt and although they have a payment plan in place now, these added challenges are causing significant stress.<sup>8</sup>

The pandemic has exacerbated an already challenging employment market for Care Experienced people, and this is unlikely to improve for some time. In recent analysis of calls to our helpline, there is ongoing evidence of this, with the most common issues raised in relation to employment being around support to secure employment, guidance on job applications and interviews, and emotional support for those who have been unsuccessful at job interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

## DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Digital exclusion has been experienced by many Care Experienced people and their families during the pandemic. We heard many examples of individuals living without basic digital means, yet digital access has been the only way many people have been able to connect or access services during the pandemic. We have seen many negative impacts of digital exclusion that are often linked to wider issues of poverty and with maintaining education for children as schools closed.

*A kinship carer is struggling with ensuring everyone in their care can access school and college work while on lockdown. They currently have one phone shared between the household and this is their only source of internet connection. This lack of equipment is limiting their ability to stay connected to friends and education but is also placing strain on their relationships with each other.<sup>9</sup>*

Members also reinforced how financially challenging it was for some Care Experienced people to access technology to remain connected and with updated information:

*'Had to buy a laptop and a phone on buy now pay later (I regret this but there was no other alternative). Put me in debt. I was scared that if I did not have that stuff, I would not have been able to connect with people and I was worried I would not be here any longer.'*

*'I don't have internet in my house and used to rely on the library which was shut for months. I have no TV either, which meant it was just me and my phone in my flat for a lot of the time.'*

As many formal processes, such as Children's Hearings had to move online, many challenges occurred impacting on children and young people's ability to participate:

*'The meetings are not good – I didn't go to my LAC Review. It was just on the phone.'*

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<sup>9</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

*A Care Experienced young person was due to participate in their Children's Hearing using the video conferencing app, VScene. Just prior to the Hearing they decided they no longer wanted to participate. They cited that the thought of interacting via digital means was causing them significant anxiety.<sup>10</sup>*

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. Members have consistently told us they prefer formal meetings face-to-face and to receive support in person.

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<sup>10</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)



Article 26,  
UNIVERSAL  
DECLARATION  
OF HUMAN  
RIGHTS

1. Everyone has the right to education.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

## EDUCATION

Throughout the pandemic, we have gathered evidence of the impact of education having to move mostly into online delivery. Members told us that the support offered by schools to keep children connected with their education was varied in quality. Initially, there was also limited financial support for children to gain access to equipment necessary to keep them learning.

Members reflected on the challenges of digital home learning and how they had to learn in new ways:

*'School being closed has meant doing work online, that wasn't good.'*

*'had some help but wasn't what I needed.'*

*'I was worried about getting behind.'*

Other members spoke positively of education moving online and some shared how staff had been supportive and flexible about attendance and expectations of students during the pandemic.

*'Accessibility to other organisations has become easier, e.g. education being virtual actually is beneficial to me as single parent.'*

Care Experienced parents and kinship carers utilising the WCFS helpline also told us how they struggled with home-schooling children. During the pandemic, many local authorities set up specific school places which would stay available for children experiencing vulnerability. However, it appeared that those who could be using the emergency education provision were sometimes unaware of their entitlement or felt it was risky to send their children to school because of potential health issues.<sup>11</sup>

We have continued to hear from Care Experienced people who require very specific advice and guidance to help them access or maintain their education, alongside

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<sup>11</sup> More detail on our concerns about Care Experienced children's education is available in our [response to the Education and Skills Committee inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education](#).

additional challenges of insecure housing, financial uncertainty, and limited family support; issues which already existed but have been worsened by the pandemic.

*A young woman called the helpline for education and finance advice. She recently received an unconditional offer from a University to study a Master's degree. However, she was concerned about her ability to progress with the course due to financial challenges and an inability to pay the deposit required for the course. Helpline staff introduced the young woman to the Widening Participation Team at the University. This team have since provided the young woman with information on available grants and bursaries and have supported her to apply for these.*



Article 20,  
UN  
Convention on  
the Rights of  
the Child

A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

## LIVING IN CARE

### CHANGES TO FAMILY CONTACT

Members have 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:

*'My son is in the care of his father which happened before the pandemic. Since the pandemic the social workers do not go and visit him. They won't visit myself and the only time we see them is at contact within their office. They say that they can't come see us as it is not safe to visit us at home. They take the word of my son's dad and step mum over the phone rather than speaking to my son. The social workers say this is because of reduced staff and staggered work hours. We are not progressing, and the pandemic is used as the reason for that.'*

Some have worked closely with their social workers to arrange in-person contact that can still take place while abiding by government guidance. Care Experienced children digitally connecting with family had mixed reviews as to how well this worked due to wider issues of digital exclusion and proficiency:

*A Care Experienced young person has regular in-person contact with their parent. Since the beginning of lockdown, it was agreed that contact will take place digitally. Unfortunately, this contact has been limited as their parent often does not have enough money to pay for the extra data charges they are incurring as a result. The young person understands this but is increasingly struggling with the lack on contact.<sup>12</sup>*

Some children in care who had contact arrangements with parents before lockdown, were told they could stay with family during lockdown. For some, this has been received positively and the flexibility of the system celebrated. Others, however, fear the

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<sup>12</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

instability and longer-term changes to placement security that this could create, and question why a move home was not better supported prior to Covid-19.

### VARIATION IN INTERPRETATION OF LOCKDOWN

Members shared how they felt different approaches were taken across local authority areas: *'They were all following different rules. All different local authorities were all different. It is like a post code lottery.'* Some felt a lack of control or choice in how lockdown rules were applied in certain situations, with a feeling that exclusive decision-making was the norm: *'Decisions are being made without actually asking us (CE community) how it will affect us or what would work best.'*

Related to this, members also spoke about how certain lockdown rules had been enforced in a 'blanket' way in some care settings:

*'Policies don't match with what the government was saying, they were being asked to live by different rules because the organisation had put in an internal policy that had no government backing - this was put in place to protect the staff not CEYP. It could have been done differently, there was no reason for the staff to enter the young person's flat, it was a blanket rule that went over all the projects.'*

It was identified that applying lockdown measures has been particularly difficult for those in group living environments.

*At the start of Covid-19 social distancing measures, a children's home direct all young people to isolate in their individual rooms, even though no one is exhibiting symptoms. The lack of guidance to children's homes and the fact that the shift rota means workers are regularly changing, results in a blanket approach which has significant impact on the wellbeing of both young people and their workers.<sup>13</sup>*

As clearer guidance emerged during the pandemic, we have seen more tailored approaches being applied to children's homes. However, it continues to be a challenging living environment to manage with ongoing lockdown measures.

### TRANSITION IN CARE

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.

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<sup>13</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, April 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

*A Care Experienced young person who lives in residential care, moved home to live with parents during lockdown. The young person does not want this to be permanent and is feeling increasingly worried that they will not be able to move back into the residential placement after lockdown. They request to be able to visit their children's home, abiding by social distancing measures but is told this is not able to happen due to risk to other young people and staff.<sup>14</sup>*

The report of Aberdeen young people's experiences of the pandemic also identified specific impacts the lockdown rules had on those making transitions in living arrangements during the pandemic: *This all occurred when young people were in the midst of various activities such as moving house, staying with family or friends etc, and many ended up stranded for several weeks, some ended up unable to return to tenancies due to travel restrictions, others living elsewhere were unable to return to Aberdeen.*

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<sup>14</sup> [Who Cares? Scotland, May 2020, Impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's Care Experienced Community](#)

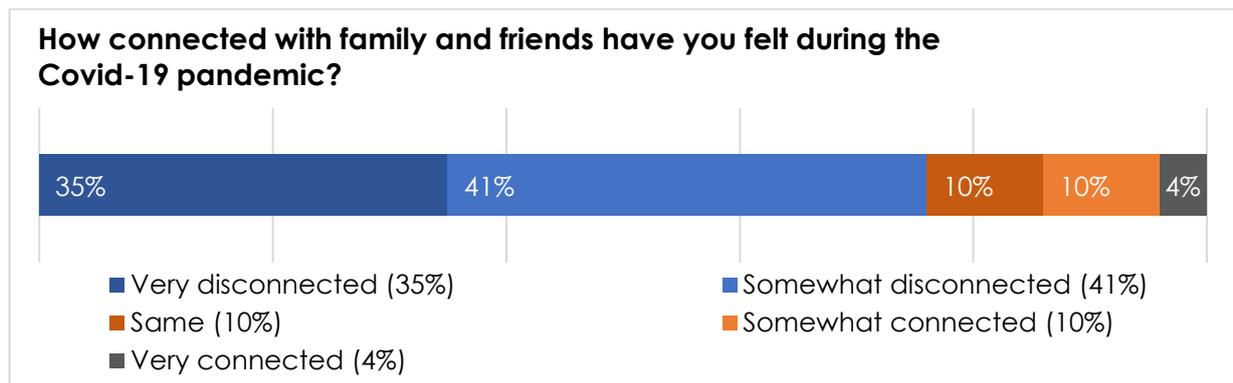


## Article 8, EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.

### RELATIONSHIPS

Members told us they had felt mostly disconnected from family and friends:



There were mixed reasons why members felt less connected, ranging from pre-existing issues with relationships, to feeling unable to properly see and speak to family:

*'Not connected to my family. We were not good at being together before and pandemic.'*

*'Need to know family are ok, just not be speaking on the phone.'*

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

*'I took in my mum and brother as they were in the vulnerable category so before national lockdown, I decided to move them into my flat so there was 9 of us living a flat without a garden... I had to deal with having my mother living with me and reset boundaries.'*

*'My family were stricter – made me feel low.'*

*'My family has fallen apart with threatening behaviour and safety becoming real concerns.'*

However, many members did share that keeping in touch with friends and family had been a positive thing during lockdown, even if for some it did have to be online. One member shared how they enjoyed getting to spend more time with family, as they were

living in lockdown together: *'It's been good as my sister and her partner (my kinship carers) were both home all the time. We did crafts and went on lots of walks. I enjoyed the quality time but struggled when everyone went back to work and school.'*

## **CARING RESPONSIBILITIES**

A resounding message we have heard from members is how difficult it has been to cope with caring responsibilities during the pandemic. In response to our online survey question **'How do you feel you have been able to manage your caring responsibilities?'** 64% told us it had been 'Very hard to manage.'

Many Care Experienced parents have shared the challenges of parenting in lockdown:

*'As a single parent I have to rely on services, which is hard for me. I don't have relationships and am having to rely on relationships that are punitive.'*

*'Being stretched in so many directions without proper support for single parents has been the biggest challenge I have faced.'*

*'Having no to little support during the pandemic especially with nurseries and childminders closing was really hard.'*

Such challenges for Care Experienced parents and for kinship carers, have been reflected on an ongoing basis via the helpline, with many callers seeking either financial advice or just someone to talk to about the challenges they are experiencing.

Members have also told us about how caring for others with existing health concerns felt like an additional worry to cope with during the pandemic:

*'Initially my adult Son was shielding for 3 months. I was really conscious of his mental and physical wellbeing. This consumed my thoughts and actions during this time. I was fearful of increased risks with my husband working in large organisation, the implications of going shopping for food and returning home and impacting on my Son's health.'*

*'My mum is vulnerable because of health issues and caring for her has been challenging as I don't want to put her at risk.'*

A Care Experienced parent shared what had helped them to cope:

*'Childcare totally disappeared for 7 months it was just me and my toddler which was really challenging especially because I was trying to get through education.'*

*Trying to keep my sanity was difficult. On the other hand, 3rd sectors were able to actually provide financial assistance.'*

### 3. MOVING FORWARD

Throughout the pandemic, Care Experienced people have told us what would help them in the short and long-term to cope with the lockdown measures. This section summarises recommendations for change and how Scotland can learn to better support the Care Experienced community moving forward, especially as the vaccine rolls out and we gradually transition out of lockdown in the coming year.

#### 1. Understanding the pandemic

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.

Information should be tailored for children and young people living in care and for care leavers, which includes specific local information as relevant.

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.

#### 2. Applying lockdown rules

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.

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.

#### 3. Access to support

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.

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.

#### **4. Wellbeing, mental and physical health**

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.

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.

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.

#### **5. Financial impact**

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.

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.

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.

#### **6. Employment**

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.

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.

### **7. Digital exclusion**

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.

### **8. Education**

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.

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.

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.

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.

## **9. Living in care**

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.

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.

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.

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.

## **10. Relationships and caring responsibilities**

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.

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.



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