



# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCOTLAND'S CARE EXPERIENCED COMMUNITY

SECOND UPDATE:  
16 MARCH TO 5 MAY 2020

# INTRODUCTION

On Monday 16th March 2020, following the U.K. Government's advice regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, organisations were asked to allow their staff to work from home "where they possibly could." The following day, Who Cares? Scotland (WC?S) changed its operational model, adopting a new approach to supporting Care Experienced people across advocacy, participation and employment. This new approach included the establishment of a helpline. 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.

Through this new provision, WC?S is continuing to see the significant impact that Covid-19 is having on many Care Experienced individuals. Most UK and Scottish Government guidance that has been issued during the pandemic attempts to support the public and key workers continuing to provide services, to adapt their behaviour using consistent and universal approaches. The examples and stories presented to WC?S during the pandemic, continue to show not only the challenges faced by the care sector in applying general guidance to the complicated system<sup>1</sup> but also for Care Experienced people, who may be less likely to have the support networks of family in place, which are assumed as a resource that everyone can fall back on. In certain circumstances, the Scottish Government has led out the design of tailored guidance with the intention of addressing the unique nature of the care system in Scotland. Where this has happened, the care sector and Care Experienced people are better placed to adapt their decisions and behaviours accordingly.

The experiences shared with us by Care Experienced people during the pandemic continue to show the very real challenge in upholding human rights during the Covid-19 crisis. Throughout lockdown so far, it has been widely acknowledged that the emergency legislation and guidance created to support the UK to manage the

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<sup>1</sup> The Independent Care Review published its concluding reports in February 2020. ['The Rules'](#) presents a clear overview of how complicated the current system is for both those in receipt of care and those working/caring within it.

pandemic, although crucial to protecting public health, is having significant impact on human rights. In a range of ways, the need to protect the general population from spread the virus is competing with the need to uphold the rights of Care Experienced people, including their rights to family life (Article 8, Human Rights Act) and to participate in the decision-making processes that impact their lives (Article 12, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

It is hoped that by WC?S capturing this information, the Scottish Government and others can continue to take a human rights-based approach to protecting the health of society, ensuring any guidance or legislative developments do not come at the cost of the important protections that exist to support those who are most vulnerable.

# ACTIVITY SUMMARY

The following findings present an overview of how Care Experienced people have utilised WCFS advocacy, helpline and participation opportunities since the beginning of lockdown.

## ADVOCACY KEY FINDINGS

- 127 care experienced people sought advocacy support due to Covid-19
- 172 issues raised since lockdown (40% of all advocacy issues) related to Covid-19
- Advocacy support was provided to those aged 5 to 29
- More than half of those receiving this support lived in their own home

## HELPLINE KEY FINDINGS

- 535 callers contacted the helpline
- 277 cases are ongoing
- 161 callers are repeat callers (30%)
- 475 callers needing financial assistance
- 185 (39%) callers have sought financial assistance more than once
- 200% increase in calls since publication of the first Impact Report
- Average of 20 calls per day (twice as many as the first two weeks)
- Average number of calls per week 134
- 49 kinship carers contacted the Helpline
- Average age of callers is 21 years old
- Half of all callers were 21 years-old or older

- Reach of helpline support has extended to Care Experienced people, carers and workers across all 32 local authorities in Scotland.

## **PARTICIPATION KEY FINDINGS**

Who Cares? Scotland has supported 409 participation activities to take place during lockdown, consisting of:

- 147 virtual champions board meetings and activities
- 55 virtual group meetings and activities
- 217 Care Experienced people have been proactively engaged in these ways by Who Cares? Scotland
- 18 years old on average
- Have taken part in an average of 7 activities for an average of 7.5 hours
- 14 one-off activities such as emergency food drops and delivery of special care packs
- Reach of participation activities has extended to Care Experienced people across at least 22 local authorities in Scotland.

# THEMES

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020, [WC?S published its first analysis](#) of themes emerging from Covid-19 and the impact this had on the Care Experienced community accessing support. Just over a month later, this report now presents the second wave of analysis, seeking to show what issues remain present and where there have been newly emerging examples of impact.

As with the first report, this paper presents an overview of how Covid-19 and the associated safety measures have impacted Care Experienced people in contact with Who Cares? Scotland, using an analysis of the helpline, examples of advocacy relating specifically to Covid-19 and the questions most asked by the Who Cares? Scotland workforce, as well as wider partners and friends. As digital participation methods have increased and gained confidence, this report is able to take findings from this engagement too. These examples can be grouped thematically under the following areas:

- Poverty
- Health and Wellbeing
- Information and Participation
- Provision of Care
- Support

Each thematic area presents a summary of the issue and contains case study examples and composite stories which present the complexity of each individual theme. Where composite stories have been used, they bring together data from many individual stories in a bid to present the complexity of issues, while respecting anonymity. Every issue presented however, is a representation of real-life challenges.

For individuals contacting WC?S for support during Covid-19, the organisation has been able to provide immediate emotional, practical or financial remedy. However, the complicated, recurrent, and interwoven nature of each case study presents clear systemic issues that need to be addressed.

Prior to reading this report, it is important to acknowledge the challenging and sensitive nature of its content. **There is incredible and innovative practice happening across Scotland right now, with Care Experienced people, carers and services responding in different ways to the pandemic.** The nature of WC?S's work providing Independent Advocacy and, more recently, the Covid-19 helpline, means that our evidence will understandably point to the challenges that Care Experienced people and their families face. **As a result, the contents of this report may be emotionally challenging to engage with. Please be conscious of how you feel before reading the rest of the report.**

# POVERTY

Those experiencing poverty, insecure housing and homelessness have continued to experience significant challenge in accessing support and applying preventive measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the lockdown measures and government guidance became more stringent, more Care Experienced people struggled to put food on the table. Many were simply unable to buy food due to lack of money, while others relied on food banks and food parcels.

In addition to food costs, many have continued to fall short of money to pay essential utility bills such as rent, electricity, gas, mobile and broadband bills, with the latter having significant impact on vital connection to family, friends and services.

Many young adults who have very recently left care sought advocacy and helpline support due to the challenges of learning how to live independently during this time. Learning how to budget finances and pay bills has been exacerbated by the need to stay home, alone, paying more on utility bills and having reduced support from services.

In the face of increasing financial hardship, many continue to turn to the state for support to fill the gap created by the pandemic. Since the last report, many have sought and secured new employment, while others have struggled to find opportunities. For those that continue to require state support, a significant number feel hindered by lengthy bureaucratic processes. This in turn has led to a rise in rent arrears, missed payments and often a choice between providing food for their families or paying bills.

For some, Covid-19 and associated measures have brought them into debt for the first time, with potentially long-term consequences on financial management and credit standing. Others are experiencing significant impact on their current debt, with increased expenditure on utilities and food causing financial hardship to soar.

The following presents examples of real-life experiences during Covid-19. Complementary case studies have been combined to showcase very real experiences, while protecting the anonymity of individuals.

## DESTITUTION AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

- A Care Experienced parent cannot afford to buy food or pay for energy bills. They report that they have not eaten properly in several days as they are prioritising feeding their children with the little food that they do have. One of their children has a physical disability. They believe they are not entitled to any family statutory support.
- While awaiting their next Universal Credit payment, a young Care Experienced person has no money to buy basics including food and sanitary products. They are embarrassed at having to phone the helpline but reports to have nowhere else to turn to.
- 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.
- A young Care Experienced person moved into a new tenancy in the first few weeks of lockdown. Their cooker was not working on arrival and they have limited working lighting. They did not know what options were available to them in order to solve this and so have spent a considerable amount of time in lockdown, unable to cook nourishing meals.
- A Care Experienced person is struggling to afford food and pay for energy bills. They are pregnant and are finding that they are limited in what they can eat without feeling unwell. As a result, they mostly feel forced to rely on takeaway food.

## SOCIAL SECURITY

- A Care Experienced parent reports that their request for an advance on their Universal Credit has been declined. They have since applied for a Crisis Grant through the Scottish Welfare Fund but the Fund are reporting significant delays due to increased demand. They were made redundant at the beginning of lockdown and are now adjusting to life with Universal Credit. With young children and increased energy and food costs, their only payment of Child Benefit will not be enough to sustain the family until their next Universal Credit payment.
- A Care Experienced parent and their partner have 2 young babies and neither has family support to lean on. They were made redundant at the beginning of lockdown, with 1 week's pay. They have applied for Universal Credit but have been told there will be a 2 week wait until payment is made. While the family still have a small amount of credit on their prepayment meter, they will soon be out of electricity and have no money left to sustain the family's food shop. On contacting a local foodbank, they were told they were overrun with requests and unable to meet demand.
- A young Care Experienced person who recently left care and is learning to live independently, reports that they have no money for food or energy payments. They recently received a Universal Credit payment, but the amount was consumed by paying back the emergency credit on their prepayment meter and bank charges. They are not due another payment for 2 weeks. They have reached out to their service supports but have not heard back. They are feeling anxious about how to manage until their next payment.
- 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 a significant amount of debt and although they have a payment plan in place now, these added challenges are causing significant stress. They previously used a local foodbank

for support but are reluctant to use again as the foodbank had very little food left and report to be struggling with the high demand.

- A Care Experienced young adult is struggling to cope financially. They are in receipt of Universal Credit but due to sanctions, they are receiving a small amount of money, monthly. While they have some food, they are not due another payment for 3 weeks and express concern about being able to afford food and energy payments for the rest of the month. They report to live in a small flat with no washing machine, usually using a local laundrette which is now closed. As a result, they are unable to keep on top of necessary washing and have no network of support to help.
- A young Care Experienced person cannot afford to buy necessities like food due to shielding with health concerns. Spending this extra time at home has understandably increased their expenditure on their prepayment meter. Until their next Universal Credit payment, they were encouraged to apply for a Crisis Grant from the Scottish Welfare fund but found the application process overly complicated and requiring details that they did not know how to provide. Once supported to complete the application, they were refused help as they had already received a Crisis Grant 3 times in the past year – each time assisted by a support worker. The individual explained that the last applications were needed because of poor transition from care to independent living when they did not feel equipped to understand how to manage finances.

## **NEW AND INCREASED DEBTS**

- A young Care Experienced student who lives alone relies on their student bursary for income. They have no family support but have always managed their finances as best they can, with no debt or arrears. Due to lockdown, they had to buy a new phone to help them continue with college work. Buying this phone impacted on their already tight finances and led to rent arrears. The impact of lockdown now means that they are in debt for the first time after very successful finance management.
- A Care Experienced single parent with two young children is struggling to keep them entertained and in a routine during lockdown. The parent is generally good at managing finances, however, the increased expenditure on utilities

and food during lockdown has left them unable to pay for their internet bill. This has in turn meant that the children have been unable to continue their education during lockdown. They previously borrowed money from a family member to ease current living costs, however they are now feeling pressure to pay this back.

- A young Care Experienced person who recently left care is struggling financially with lockdown expenditure and existing debt. The young person is supported well by their throughcare worker and has been provided with shopping vouchers. However, they are struggling to pay for utility bills and rent. They are in receipt of Universal Credit, however every time they are paid, the money is consumed by overdraft and bank charges. With their need to spend more on heating their home during lockdown, they are concerned about the impact on their existing debt and how they will manage it beyond Covid-19.

## RELEVANT GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

There have been significant national and local attempts to address instances where experience of poverty has been worsened or caused by the pandemic. However, with the ever-evolving and un-defined impact of Covid-19, we are concerned about the long-term impact and urge the Scottish Government to provide clarity on how it will continue to support individuals and families beyond the immediate crisis.

### CALLS TO ACTION:

1. **Clear communication around how to access financial assistance for both those in receipt of statutory support and those 'on the edge' of receiving it.** We are pleased to see that the Scottish Government, in partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau, have launched a new campaign to ensure CAB can act as a single point of information for people who are struggling financially. However, we are concerned that too many people in need are barely coping with the limited amount of income they receive, particularly when current living costs can be higher. Many seem unclear about what financial support they can access through their local authority, and many local authority workers report that they are over-stretched due to staff shortages and limited funds to lean on.

Clear communication about specific local authority financial support offers should be available on the websites of Scottish Government, Citizens Advice Bureau and local authorities.

- 2. Increased support 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.** For too many in receipt of benefits, financial stress is heightened during this period. Many are being hugely impacted by the delivery of Universal Credit with payment delays and punitive sanctions, many of which are the result of issues prior to Covid-19. Likewise, many are being denied Crisis Grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund due to having applied 3 times in the past year. During the pandemic, individuals should be supported with financial assistance where needed, with a more lenient approach taken by those administering funds during this unique time.

In addressing this, the Scottish Government should scrutinise and challenge the operation of Universal Credit, especially the waiting times in place for new claimants of UC and the ethics of punitive decision-making on UC entitlements during Covid-19, as we understand that sanctions put in place are currently more difficult to appeal. The delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund by local authorities must be further scrutinised to ensure administration of the fund is adjusted to meet the unprecedented need of people experiencing financial crisis during this period. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People should give consideration to the role of Social Security Scotland in how administering devolved benefits can be utilised to provide a safety net for Care Experienced people impacted by Covid-19, as a [named corporate parent](#).

We also support the [calls to action listed in a joint letter](#) to the First Minister from a coalition of charities concerned about the growth in child poverty.

- 3. A commitment 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.** The Scottish Government should provide protection to those in debt due to Covid-19 and to those who could lose their homes

because of rent arrears due to rising financial hardship. With many people reporting new debt, rent arrears and significant challenges repaying existing debt, we urge the Scottish Government to consider providing greater relief to those in such circumstances. A long-term impact of debt can be difficulty in maintaining housing costs. We are concerned that the current extension to 6 months for eviction protection will not protect those on low incomes, who will continue to experience significant challenge to eradicate or manage their debt. We support [Shelter Scotland's ask](#) to ban all evictions and all threats of evictions during this emergency.

Likewise, whilst we welcome the Scottish Government's extension of the moratorium period to 6 months in order to prevent debt recovery action during this time and the increased accessibility for individuals to declare bankruptcy, we are concerned about the lack of action to combat longer-term impacts of debt.

# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

As social distancing measures continue, more and more Care Experienced people have felt the impact of social isolation and loneliness. Many have reached out as their mental health and wellbeing deteriorated, often exacerbated by financial uncertainty and the unknown of the next few days, weeks and months.

With the increased challenges of maintaining wellbeing, services are doing incredible work to provide creative, participatory opportunities for Care Experienced people to take part in. Many of these focus on providing fun and connection, but with the intended hope of providing positive and long-lasting coping mechanisms for when individuals struggle.

While in the last report, exacerbated existing mental health concerns were discussed, the new emerging data presents challenges for both existing and newly developing mental ill-health. In the initial weeks of lockdown, concerns around mental health were shared by Care Experienced adults. As time progresses, increasingly children and young people are also expressing that they are experiencing anxiety, fear and low moods associated with lockdown and its impact.

A number of Care Experienced people and kinship carers are reporting the emotional impact of bereavement during lockdown measures. For most, these bereavements happened prior to Covid-19, often within the past year. Many people are struggling to cope with the grief of losing important relationships, and with extra time at home, often alone or with limited social interaction, expressions of grief come to the fore.

Many individuals, Care Experienced people and carers alike, are reporting the strain that poor mental health is placing on important relationships in their lives. With the reduction in support from services, relationships with family and friends are all the more vital in supporting people through this period.

The following presents examples of real-life experiences during Covid-19. Complementary case studies have been combined to showcase very real experiences, while protecting the anonymity of individuals.

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION**

- A young Care Experienced person has escaped domestic violence during lockdown. The local authority is attempting to source suitable housing however this is taking some time to resolve. In the meantime, they have been provided with a room in a local hotel but feel extremely isolated, being far away from friends and networks. This isolation is exacerbated by the mental health impact of their domestic violence experience.
- A Care Experienced person is living in a homeless hostel during lockdown. They do not have a phone, nor do they have any other means of connecting with their network. They rely on hostel staff to keep them updated with news on Covid-19 measures. This lack of connection is significantly impacting their wellbeing and they are increasingly speaking with anger about the services that exist to support them.
- A Care Experienced person living in homeless accommodation is grappling with feelings of loneliness during lockdown. They miss contact with friends and feel confused about the changing Covid-19 guidance, which is further challenging their wellbeing. With pre-existing, significant mental health problems, they usually rely on intensive support from their Community Psychiatric Nurse, however their CPN has cancelled all appointments citing Covid-19 precautions.

## **BEREAVEMENT**

- 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 their throughcare worker, they are faced with the impact of grief while having little in the way of coping mechanisms.

- A kinship carer describes the challenges of their situation in lockdown, with a focus on a recent bereavement. A few months prior to lockdown, they became the carer for their sibling's children. Their sibling's death followed the very recent deaths of their parents last year. Coping with grief amidst the challenges of settling into a new kinship care arrangement is now intensified by the financial and emotional impact of lockdown.
- A young Care Experienced person speaks about the challenges of lockdown, focusing initially on the financial implications. After some discussion, it emerges that their mental health has been the greatest challenge. They explain that their kinship carers both died earlier this year. As the carers were their main relationship throughout life, they are now dealing with grief alongside a significantly reduced support network to help them during lockdown.
- The kinship carer of a Care Experienced person died as a result of contracting Covid-19. The individual is understandably struggling with the impact of this, which feels enhanced during this time. Their grief is further exacerbated by their inability to afford suitable clothes for the funeral.

## RELATIONSHIP IMPACT

- A young Care Experienced person has recently left care and moved back to live with their parents. This move home has been a difficult adjustment for all involved and tensions between each family member has been exacerbated by lockdown measures. Financial pressures are the biggest challenge with the family all struggling with lack of income, Universal Credit sanctions and increased number of people living in the home, without opportunity to leave for respite.
- A Care Experienced young person is feeling extremely anxious about their financial situation and limited social contact during lockdown. They normally hold a very good relationship with the Social Worker, however they are increasingly frustrated at their Social Worker's inability to support them as they normally would. The anger and frustration are taking its toll on the relationship and they report that they are worried there will be long-lasting impact.
- A Care Experienced young person recently moved out of care and back home with their parent who they have not lived with for many years. They report that

the stress of lockdown is putting considerable strain on their relationship. Their parent has been threatening to throw them out most nights. Most recently the young person has moved into homeless accommodation due to the relationship breaking down beyond immediate repair.

## RELEVANT GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

The Scottish Government, statutory services and third sector providers have continued to work hard to support everyone through the challenges of Covid-19. There has been significant focus on supporting and encouraging the health and wellbeing of the general population, however we are worried about the longer-term impact on those with mental illness or those with existing mental health concerns.

### CALLS TO ACTION:

- 1. Clear communication from Scottish Government must be given about what support should be provided by mental health services and providers during Covid-19.** There must be clear and accessible information in the form of guidance or a letter to individuals and services, stating the rights that those with existing mental health concerns have services during the pandemic. While there has been emphasis on supporting the general wellbeing of the population, for those with existing mental health concerns the guidance around what level of service they should continue to experience from health providers is less clear. Some individuals are reporting very positive and proactive support from their Community Psychiatric Nurses and Psychiatrists with regular phone calls. Others have experienced a reduction in contact from mental health professionals, or a change in worker, and are feeling confused about where to go when they need support.
- 2. Immediate investment in and enhancement of the mental health services available for individuals who have experienced trauma and loss, as called for by the Independent Care Review.** Although we have seen investment by the Scottish Government in wellbeing services with targeted helplines and resources developed for the general population to cope with the pandemic, there has been limited discussion of the gaps which exist in the provision of longer-term and more intensive mental health services in Scotland. For

example, investment in the new 'Distress Brief Intervention' programme is a positive step forward, however, there is a lack of clarity on what those referred to DBI level 2 service 14 day window of support will be able to access longer-term, locally. Many of the Care Experienced people supported by WC?S have experienced long waiting lists to access services, sometimes for over a year after being referred by a GP.

The impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated the existing mental health problems for many who were already struggling to access services, something which will not be solved with the end of lockdown measures. As called for by the Independent Care Review in the Promise, the Scottish Government must "ensure that timely, trauma informed and thoughtful support therapies act as a cushion to all those that require it, regardless of diagnosis".

# INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION

The impact of adjusting to engaging with others and accessing information via digital means, and in many cases being unable to do so effectively due to digital exclusion, continues to impact those we support. Increasingly, the longing for connection and to be surrounded by people has become more and more prominent. Some embraced technology and joined online groups, while others faced prolonged formal processes with statutory services trying to adjust to the new reality. The adaptation of formal processes to digital spaces prolonged processes to the extent that they could be found to breach care experienced people's human rights, limiting their participation and choice, and yet were always led out in a bid to adhere to social distancing, ultimately aiming to protect public health.

As Covid-19 continues and services adapt to offering connection and participation through digital means, many are limited in their ability to participate due to lack of access to essential equipment. Many kinship carers and Care Experienced parents are accessing the helpline as a result of faulty or old equipment. Carers, parents and teachers seem unsure if the school should support with providing replacement equipment. Additionally, some kinship carers have been directed to WC&S helpline by Social Workers, rather than engaging directly with the school for support with laptops and tablets.

In addition to WiFi, laptops and tablets, a significant number of individuals report to have no phone. This lack of vital connection is having significant impact on connection and a feeling of isolation. For many, their phones also offer their only internet connection and so the lack of one can have significant impact on their ability to maintain education, job searches and stay informed on Covid-19 measures.

For those that do have appropriate equipment and have been able to participate in opportunities and meetings digitally, there have been some important reflections about how this can feel. While many have enjoyed the move to digital participation, others have felt it as significant invasion of privacy and with the potential to leave them feeling stigmatised.

The following presents examples of real-life experiences during Covid-19. Complementary case studies have been combined to showcase very real experiences, while protecting the anonymity of individuals.

## EDUCATION AND EQUIPMENT

- 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.
- A kinship carer who began caring for their grandson just prior to lockdown is struggling with ensuring the child is able to stay connected with their education. Their laptop is very old and their Wi-Fi connection is not strong enough to connect to the school's server. Their child is feeling increasingly worried about losing friends and falling behind with schoolwork. The family were already struggling with adjusting to the new living arrangement, but this added challenge is significantly impacting their collective wellbeing.
- A kinship carer reports that the family laptop has recently broken. This means that the two children they care for are unable to access schoolwork online. They have been attempting to continue schoolwork using pen and paper, however their teacher has informed them that this is not enough. The carer is attempting to source a tablet from WCFS helpline.
- A Care Experienced young person living in a rural location has been struggling with poor internet connection, meaning their engagement in important meetings has been impacted. They now report that their phone has broken

and they are struggling to find affordable data packages to ensure they can stay connected during this time.

## THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

- A Care Experienced young person was unable to attend their Children's Hearing due to all Hearings moving to digital format. While the digital format was tested out, only the Reporter and Panel Members were able to attend. The young person accepted this but experienced a delay in hearing about what decision was made. With feedback not following immediately after the Hearing, the young person felt increasingly anxious about what the outcome would be.
- 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.
- An Advocacy and Participation Worker attends a Children's Hearing on behalf of a young person who does not want to join via VScene. The APW reflected that the digital format works well until there are a larger number of people joining. During this Hearing, there were over 10 people and so the Reporter struggled to manage the interactions, with many speaking over each other and some people being repeatedly 'kicked out' of the app. The APW reflected that this would have been a difficult experience for the young person had they chosen to attend.
- A Care Experienced young person attended their Looked After Children's Review using video conferencing software. While the review progressed well digitally, the young person reflected after that they felt it was too much of an invasion into their home life. They felt uncomfortable knowing that everyone participating in the meeting could see the backdrop of their home.
- A Care Experienced parent attends a Children's Hearing for their child who is subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order. The parent reflects after the meeting that they were anxious about the Reporter and Panel Members seeing their home, which has not yet been decorated or fully furnished. They worried

about stigma and the associated impact that this would have on Panel Members' decision making.

## RELEVANT GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

The Scottish Government has recognised the need to tackle digital exclusion, [with tailored funding provided to key third sector organisations](#) to connect vulnerable families to the internet and provide digital equipment. The Children's Hearing System has also rapidly adapted to operate on a digital platform. However, for those individuals not working with designated organisations, there is lack of clarity on how individuals who experience digital exclusion can access support to get online.

There must also be further development of *how* digital platforms operate once they are up and running, to respond to the impact of these different types of engagement methods on the individuals who are able to utilise them and now rely on them to access support. This is particularly important if many digital platforms are to remain post-lockdown.

### CALL TO ACTION:

1. **The Connecting Scotland project should allocate tailored funding for Care Experienced people experiencing digital exclusion and create a simpler way to refer individuals to a local authority contact, clearly assigned for each area.**

There is currently no clear process in place to refer individuals to the Connecting Scotland project and the funding allocated to third sector organisations is only available to those already in touch with their services. Yet many individuals have a much more urgent need for, and increased reliance on, technology to access vital support during Covid-19. Although the Scottish Government have stated that Connecting Scotland will work with industry and other partners to identify and support digitally excluded households, it is important to ensure those most in need can gain digital access.

In particular, we have identified through our helpline that those Care Experienced people living alone in tenancies, Care Experienced parents, informal kinship carers and many young Care Experienced people have needed a variety of financial support to combat digital exclusion. Often these

costs include paying phone bills, purchasing tablets and replacing broken mobile phones.

- 2. There should be greater clarity from schools and local authorities around what they can provide in the way of equipment and digital access support.** As highlighted above, we are aware of the Pupil Equity Funding which has been made available to all schools and the ability for the Attainment Scotland Funding to be redirected to mitigate the impact of school closures on the most disadvantaged families. [Examples given by Scottish Government of how the funding could be used by schools, include the purchasing of tablets to provide support for digital learning at home.](#)

However, we have spoken to many families struggling with the impact of digital exclusion on their ability to maintain their child's education and they are often unaware of any support available to them locally. In particular, it seems as though they have not been offered financial support to purchase technology or meet costs of getting online from their child's school. The Scottish Government must clarify the role of schools and local authorities in combatting digital exclusion being experienced by children who should continue to be supported to learn during Covid-19. There should be a specific focus from schools on understanding the impact of their support during lockdown on the Care Experienced pupils they teach.

# PROVISION OF CARE

The care sector and the young people that rely on it continue to face the challenge of interpreting general government guidance to suit the provision of care and support in this unique sector. Where tailored guidance has been created, the impact is positive in helping carers, workers and young people understand their role in both protecting children and young people and the public health of society.

With the standard structure of care and support provision being impacted, important rights have been disrupted. Most commonly, limitations around contact with friends and family are cited as proving challenging or confusing in terms of guidance. Some continue to use digital connection options such as video conferencing apps and there have been mixed reviews as to how this works with contact with family. Others have worked closely with their Social Workers to understand how in-person contact can take place while abiding by government guidance.

Some children and young people have had to change placements during or just prior to lockdown. On occasion, this has taken place due to the closure of their previous placement as a result of staff/carer shortages. For others, they had been on contact arrangements with parents and it was then agreed that they could stay there for the duration of lockdown. For some, this has been received positively and the flexibility of the system celebrated. Others, however, fear the 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.

Regardless of the change, there has been a marked increase in expressions of worry and anxiety caused by Covid-19 and associated measures. The culmination of this experience alongside the impact of childhood and adolescent trauma, means that the care sector and those around it are having to grapple with the potential longer-

term impact of Covid-19 on Care Experienced children and young people's wellbeing.

The following presents examples of real-life experiences during Covid-19. Complementary case studies have been combined to showcase very real experiences, while protecting the anonymity of individuals.

## **PLACEMENT CHANGES**

- A Care Experienced young person asks to live with their parent during lockdown. This move is agreed by both social work and the residential placement. They have been living at home with little support since the beginning of lockdown and it is progressing well. The young person and parent are happy with this but frustrated that it has taken for lockdown to occur before this level of contact and change in living arrangement was agreed.
- 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.
- A Care Experienced young person is admitted to secure accommodation during lockdown. They are immediately quarantined in their room for 14 days to limit possible transmission of Covid-19. The young person and their advocacy worker request that there is discussion around the length of quarantine due to the young person's additional support needs. They are told that 14 days quarantine is necessary for all new admissions. Their mother is concerned about the significant traumatic impact that quarantine could have on their child, given the high level of need they already have.

## **CONTACT WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

- A Care Experienced young person has been having contact with their father via video conferencing. They have asked their social worker if they could have in-person contact while complying with social distancing measures. The social

worker has agreed to this and will facilitate this contact ensuring Government guidance is met.

- A Care Experienced parent has been having regular in-person contact with their child who lives in kinship care. During lockdown, they have been trying to organise contact via digital means. The kinship carers have refused to follow through on this until they receive official notice that this is allowed by their Lawyer or Social Worker. It took some time to confirm this and, by the time it was, contact had drifted by several weeks.
- 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.
- A young Care Experienced person has begun self-harming during the lockdown period. Their placement is stable however contact with family has been significantly impacted due to the need to rely on digital engagement. Workers are concerned and are unsure if the self-harming behaviour is a result of lockdown, longer-term issues, or both.

## **RISE IN ANXIETY**

- A Care Experienced young person living in foster care reports that they have been feeling increasingly anxious as lockdown measures continue. They do not have a mental illness, nor do they have mental health support, however they are reporting increasing anxiety due to worry about the future and the impact of Covid-19.
- A Care Experienced young person living in a residential placement is concerned that another young person continues to abscond and refuses to comply with social distancing guidance. They are feeling increasingly worried about the risk that this young person is placing themselves in, alongside the rest of the placement.
- A Care Experienced child is regularly feeling upset. They explain that they are concerned about losing their friends because they are not at school right now

and are not able to take part in the school's virtual teaching sessions due to limited access to the family tablet.

- A Care Experienced parent receives statutory support from Social Work. They are currently receiving weekly visits from duty social workers that they do not have a relationship with. The duty workers have not been wearing PPE and so they are increasingly anxious about the family's exposure to Covid-19 transmission. They understand that Social Work need to see the children regularly, but they feel they are being put at an unnecessary level of risk.

## RELEVANT GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

The Scottish Government has continued to develop guidance for the care sector and for the workforce supporting children and young people in care. However, there are still proactive steps that could be taken to mitigate the longer-term impacts of the virus on the operation of care services for Care Experienced children and young people.

### CALLS TO ACTION:

1. **Clear guidance should be made available by the Scottish Government on how transitions and admissions to new placements can be managed to minimise risk of virus transmission, while ensuring blanket approaches are not encouraged.** The publication of Scottish Government guidance on [how to manage Covid-19 in residential childcare settings](#) was a welcome step in providing clarity to the operation of group-living environments for Care Experienced children and young people. However, since the release of this guidance there have been instances where children and young people are being isolated in their individual rooms for 14 days, on admission to secure accommodation. There is little in the way of guidance for how this should be managed across all types of placement, while taking account the individual needs of children and young people.
2. **When planning for the easing of lockdown measures, prioritise resuming contact arrangements for Care Experienced people separated from family and friends.** The nature of living in state care for many children and young people means being separated from parents, siblings and support networks of friends.

This means that whilst many of us have been able to safely isolate with people who provide support and connection in our lives, Care Experienced people are likely to be experiencing long periods of physical separation from those they would usually be able to see via 'contact' arrangements. The resuming of face-to-face 'contact' arrangements with appropriate social distancing in place must be prioritised as lockdown is eased. This approach will be crucial in order to protect and maintain the relationships which are vital for many children and young people in care.

3. **Factored into the Scottish Government's exit plan, there must be the commitment to scrutinise around how transitions for children and young people in care have been managed during Covid-19. This will ensure that when lockdown is eased, children and young people in care or who have recently left can be supported to live where is best for them.** There have been many children and young people whose care placements have faced disruption during Covid-19. Likewise, many are experiencing a delay in moving in or out of care placements. This is understandable as front-line care services are still dealing with the pressure of a crisis and are finding solutions at a rapid pace, whilst keeping vulnerable people safe and following Scottish Government guidance. Work must be done at a local level to understand the impact of Covid-19 on decision-making about rapid changes to care arrangements for individual children and young people in care, or who have recently left.
4. **Implementation of the Independent Care Review's promise for Scotland's care system must consider the impact of Covid-19 on the Care Experienced community and how the pandemic may have compounded the trauma of many individuals.** The work underway to implement [the Independent Care Review recommendations](#) has understandably been delayed due to the pressure on Scottish Government to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland. However, as the next stage of the review's work starts to progress, there must be pro-active work done to understand and consider the impact of Covid-19 on the Care Experienced population. In particular, we are concerned about the compounded trauma of Care Experienced individuals who have

experienced lockdown and a reduction in support available to cope with the impacts of Covid-19.

# SUPPORT

The vast majority of Care Experienced people who have accessed the WC?S helpline during Covid-19 have some form of relationship with services, both statutory and other. For many Care Experienced people, typical networks of family and friends can be limited or complicated. For this reason, being able to lean on professional support is incredibly important. Likewise, where there are positive family and friend networks, they themselves are limited in what they can do right now.

Many Care Experienced people have reached out for crisis support from the WC?S helpline. Some are known to the organisation, others are not. Often, the reduction in regular support is cited as providing challenge, often referring to the importance of connecting with Throughcare workers, Social Workers, Support Workers, Community Psychiatric Nurses and Psychiatrists. For others, the regularity of support may have stayed the same, albeit now digital and phone call based, but being faced with new workers covering for those on sick leave is presenting additional challenges.

The most commonly cited challenge to regular service provision, is education. With many Care Experienced parents and kinship carers utilising the WC?S helpline, it is clear that many are struggling with home-schooling children. However, it appears that those who could be using the emergency education provision, are not aware of their entitlement.

For professionals attempting to replace frontline, in-person support, the challenge is vast. Social Workers, those providing advocacy, Intensive Support Workers and many others, all face significant challenge in how to ensure the Care Experienced people they support are coping during this time. Importantly however, in the face of increasing challenge to service provision, collaboration between organisations is strong; leaning on each other and recognising individual strengths and remits.

The following presents examples of real-life experiences during Covid-19. Complementary case studies have been combined to showcase very real experiences, while protecting the anonymity of individuals.

## THE CHANGING NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

- A Care Experienced parent with a baby and a young child is attempting to manage the household and parent in difficult circumstances. Her older child arrived back in her care just days before lockdown, after several years of living with the other parent. This change has been challenging for all however social work are struggling to provide her with meaningful support during lockdown. They currently have 'spot check' visits but reports that this approach causes more anxiety than support. The older child is exhibiting increasingly distressed behaviour due to the change in circumstances. This child is not yet registered at the local school due to administrative delays when they moved, caused by lockdown.
- A Care Experienced young adult has recently been granted early release from prison under measures to manage the outbreak of Covid-19. They speak of significant mental health needs, for which they were supposed to be receiving community-based support from a psychiatrist. This has been put on hold because of Covid-19 which means they have no current mental health support. They were also referred to a local third-sector provider for transition support however their allocated worker is now on sick leave and is yet to be replaced.
- A throughcare worker reaches out to the helpline on behalf of a Care Experienced young person they support. They discuss the financial and emotional impact facing the young person as a result of Covid-19. The worker notes that the young person has recently started receiving Universal Credit but is struggling to pay household bills and costs with this income alone. They have been supporting the young person emotionally and financially but are now at a point where they need support from others to sustain the young person's living situation.
- A Care Experienced young person who lives independently is managing well with limited finances during lockdown. However, with limited income they have been unable to purchase a Wi-Fi package or relevant equipment such as a laptop or tablet. This means they are unable to maintain education or socialise with friends digitally. The young person put WC?S and their local Support Worker in touch with each other. A collaborative approach to financial and emotional

support was agreed between both, ensuring costs and support to set up were no longer a barrier to digital access.

- A Care Experienced person severely affected by mental illness is struggling with the change in community-based support. In-person contact with their Community Psychiatric Nurse has been stopped during lockdown. Instead they have been encouraged to connect with a local mental health team. This change in support is significantly impacting on their mental illness and their ability to cope with life during lockdown.
- A Care Experienced person has a Children's Hearing approaching during lockdown. They find out last minute that their lawyer is no longer working due to Covid-19. They ask that their Advocacy and Participation Worker helps to source another lawyer in time for the Hearing. While successful in doing this, the new lawyer is not familiar with the case, nor do they have a relationship with the young person.

## EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

- A kinship carer reports that they are struggling with how to engage and occupy their teenage nephew while in lockdown. Their nephew has additional support needs and is exhibiting distressed behaviour due to a lack of routine and stimulating schoolwork. The kinship carer reports that there is no formal social work involvement and the school is not providing any additional support. As a result, they feel hopeless about who to turn to for support and where to access online resources.
- A Care Experienced parent is struggling with the financial and emotional impact of home-schooling their children. Normally the children would have access to free school meals during the day and the household is feeling the impact of not having this security during lockdown. The family were not aware that they could still access free school meals during this time.
- A Care Experienced student is struggling with completing their college work from home, while living with insufficient Wi-Fi and an old laptop. They are concerned that the impacting that lockdown is having on their studies and the potential implications for acceptance to University next year. They currently have a conditional offer and they are very dependent on this term's grades.

## RELEVANT GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

It has been necessary to adapt many aspects of frontline work, for example, education hubs were introduced to safely continue providing a limited amount of school places to maintain education for children in vulnerable families. However, to access this type of support, individuals often need to be connected in already with statutory support services.

Many Care Experienced parents and carers who have contacted us, are without formal support from services and are therefore less likely to be identified as in need of this type of additional resource. This is a concern because many of these families would benefit hugely from extra support and some may experience family breakdown if left unsupported during the pandemic. More work must be done to identify where the need for support lies and how the most vulnerable individuals and families can be prioritised.

### CALLS TO ACTION:

- 1. During the remainder of the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritise providing education support for all Care Experienced children who need it.** This is especially important for children living in kinship care families (including informal kinship arrangements) and for Care Experienced parents who may benefit from increased support.

We welcome the work being done by teachers and schools to maintain places for vulnerable children and create digital engagement, [supported by Education Scotland](#). However, despite the increased investment by the Scottish Government in the [Pupil Equity Fund](#), which has been provided to mitigate the impact of school closures on the most disadvantaged families, we are seeing a variation in the support available to support children to continue learning. We would like to see a level of scrutiny on how schools have utilised the PEF to ensure Care Experienced children are supported, in line with the Scottish Government's ambitious Scottish Attainment Challenge that has a specific [focus on Care Experienced children and young people](#).

Specifically, we want to see the offer of school places prioritised for vulnerable families with Care Experienced children (especially for kinship care families, in

both formal and informal arrangements) and for families with Care Experienced parents that feel they need support. Some families are not aware of available school places and many are not connected to statutory support that can then assist them to access these options.

2. **Flexibility on social distancing measures for vulnerable parents and families, especially where one parent is isolating with children.** Whilst the Scottish Government has understandably had to focus on how best to enforce lockdown measures, there has been welcome flexibility in certain lockdown rules, [for example in cases of shared parenting](#). However, there must also be active consideration of 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 believe that single parents should be able to follow the guidance given to separated parents with shared custody of a child, by substituting a family member or friend to help with childcare. This is particularly important for those without a separated partner providing joint parenting.
  
3. **When planning for the easing of lockdown measures, Scottish Government must prioritise support being made available to Care Experienced individuals and families most in need, by allowing key professionals and organisations to safely provide support in person.** Key professionals will include statutory services such as Social Workers, Family Support Workers and Health Visitors, but also the crucial support provided by 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations such as those which provide advocacy and practical support. The Scottish Government is understandably focusing on how to maintain lockdown and keep people safe during the pandemic, however, as an exit strategy is developed, the priority must be on vital services resuming meaningful support for those who need it most. We want to see proactive planning detailing how frontline services supporting Care Experienced people and families will be able to safely operate, quickly, post-lockdown.

# CALL TO ACTION SUMMARY

## POVERTY

- Clear communication around how to access financial assistance for both those in receipt of statutory support and those 'on the edge' of receiving it.
- Increased support 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.
- A commitment 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.

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Clear communication from Scottish Government must be given about what support should be provided by mental health services and providers during Covid-19.
- Immediate investment in and enhancement of the mental health services available for individuals who have experienced trauma and loss, as called for by the Independent Care Review.

## INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION

- The Connecting Scotland project should allocate tailored funding for Care Experienced people experiencing digital exclusion and create a simpler way to refer individuals to a local authority contact, clearly assigned for each area.

- There should be greater clarity from schools and local authorities around what they can provide in the way of equipment and digital access support.

## **PROVISION OF CARE**

- Clear guidance should be made available by the Scottish Government on how transitions and admissions to new placements can be managed to minimise risk of virus transmission, while ensuring blanket approaches are not encouraged.
- When planning for the easing of lockdown measures, prioritise resuming contact arrangements for Care Experienced people separated from family and friends.
- Factored into the Scottish Government's exit plan, there must be the commitment to scrutinise around how transitions for children and young people in care have been managed during Covid-19. This will ensure that when lockdown is eased, children and young people in care or who have recently left can be supported to live where is best for them.
- Implementation of the Independent Care Review's promise for Scotland's care system must consider the impact of Covid-19 on the Care Experienced community and how the pandemic may have compounded the trauma of many individuals.

## **SUPPORT**

- During the remainder of the Covid-19 pandemic, prioritise providing education support for all Care Experienced children who need it.
- Flexibility on social distancing measures for vulnerable parents and families, especially where one parent is isolating with children.
- When planning for the easing of lockdown measures, Scottish Government must prioritise support being made available to Care Experienced individuals and families most in need, by allowing key professionals and organisations to safely provide support in person.

## CONTACTS

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

Carly Edgar, Policy Manager, [cedgar@whocarescotland.org](mailto:cedgar@whocarescotland.org)

Lucy Hughes, Policy Officer, [lhughes@whocarescotland.org](mailto:lhughes@whocarescotland.org)

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