

“I’m Scared I’m Going to Die...”

Impact of LOCKDOWN on Care Experienced young people in Aberdeen

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(Peter Melrose. Development Officer, Participation and Engagement, Who Cares? Scotland, August 2020)

The following information has been collected from a range of sources and services in Aberdeen. These areas are drawn together by information and feedback from young people gathered by the Development Officer (Who Cares? Scotland) where the impacts are further illustrated and hopefully point to solutions moving forward.

The Development Officer interviewed and gathered information about the experience of lockdown on Care Experienced young people throughout the restrictions and crisis, by talking to 27 young people in direct relation to this report. In response to requests to expand this feedback, the Youth Team provided additional information from other young people with whom they work closely; they spoke to about 10 young people. Information gathered by Children’s Rights presents a broad overview of significant issues and their impacts on services and young people. They gathered this information from about 60 referrals commencing from mid-March and it reflects emergent concerns and issues arising as the crisis deepened.

Although compiled by the Development Officer, this report and recommendations have been created by Aberdeen Care Experienced (ACE) young people, who provided the feedback and discussion points throughout the crisis either directly or through support personnel.

Young people had said previously that they want other people to know what it feels like when you are Care Experienced in different settings. Direct quotes from young people during discussions are represented in ***bold and italic***. They are used here to help convey the emotions and feelings Aberdeen Care Experienced young people faced during this time.

Critical thematic issues

There are several thematic issues raised by young people that are overwhelmingly consistent across all settings. While young people appear to have experienced the same challenges and difficulties that everyone experienced more broadly, for Care Experienced young people these added to the challenges they already faced. Overwhelmingly, these issues and challenges only exacerbated pre-existing issues of isolation, loneliness, mental health issues, anxiety and depression, PTSD, and also physical health issues.

These thematic issues are listed below, and explored in more detail within the report:

1. **Lack of available information:**
2. **Additional difficulties for young people living outside the city**
3. **Isolation, digital access, and contact:**
4. **Loneliness**
5. **Social work involvement, visits, and engagement:**
6. **Police involvement, legal matters and changing laws:**

After each theme is detailed below, there is a section, 'What young people said need to happen'. This is their feedback on each of the areas by way of providing/suggesting solutions. These solutions have influenced the recommendations.

Mental and physical health impacts

Mental health impacts: The core underlying issue for all young people, their support workers, and other people, is the profound impact on mental health that this crisis has had and continues to have on them. Every aspect of all the feedback obtained from young people and others, included some reference to the negative impact on mental health of the restrictions and lockdown. Each of the thematic areas included consistent reference to the negative impacts on mental health for young people.

Fear, the unknown, genuine belief that death was imminent at times, isolation, fear for others and so on, have all impacted on the mental and physical health of Care Experienced young people.

This issue was reported by young people in relation to themselves, but young people also raised concerns about other young people, support personnel raising concerns about young people and themselves, organisations raising similar concerns and so on.

In short, the impact of this crisis on mental health cannot be overstated; it is acknowledged widely that the residual effects of this will be long lasting and will require treatment well into the future.

Pre-existing health issues: A significant proportion of Care Experienced young people have pre-existing health issues and these impacted their ability to participate and engage at any level. Many found themselves being told to isolate for weeks at a time and to shield due to health issue such as Asthma etc. On top of this, 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.

As you read through the themes and recommendations, it is important that you continue to have the impacts of mental and physical health issues woven into your thoughts, as this is the key to all the other impactful issues and themes.

“No one knows what to do, no one can tell me what I’m meant to do!”

Recommendations for next time

Once again, it is important to note that this pandemic has demonstrated that young people and support personnel in their various roles, will work together to ensure that what ever has to be done is done, to ensure the well-being of young people as much as possible. Young people have strongly acknowledged this and that their various support personnel were reliable and demonstrated a high level of kindness and assistance to them. Nevertheless, issues regarding the very limited availability or communication from more senior Corporate Parents, clear policy or practice direction have all had an impact.

Putting what we have learned through the first wave, together with what was achieved and what young people have said, young people are able to make a number of recommendation moving forward.

1. **Inclusion** of young people at all appropriate levels. This issue runs through almost all themes
2. **Immediate Planning** to commence immediately and be inclusive of young people
3. **Individual** plans to meet complex and additional needs prior to the next wave
4. **Inclusive, well planned, and ongoing communication** processes with all young people: this should also help to interpret negative and confusing media reports for them as well. This can include plans for them, where to get supports, who to contact etc.
5. **Awareness** of young people who may struggle and planning with them to meet their needs throughout. This can include arrangements for those with additional health needs
6. **Joined up services**: this speaks to the needs of services to work in a demonstrably coordinated way
7. **Opportunity** for support personnel meeting to provide separate feedback and ways forward. There was a significant amount of staff lead feedback in responses and this strongly suggests that they would benefit from separate processes. Young people have noted that support personnel need to be able to meet and coordinate responses. This would create opportunities to share information and provide confidence for workers to better plan and coordinate services to young people.

Overview

In about January 2020, first reports began to appear in the media consistently about coronavirus. At this point it was not regarded a crisis in Scotland or anywhere else in the UK. By March 2020 cases began to appear throughout England and some into Scotland as well.

From mid-March things escalated rapidly. The ACE Development Officer (employed by Who Cares? Scotland) was directed to commence working from home one week prior to the rest of the country being directed into work from home in lockdown conditions. At this point what is important to note is that nationally there was no prior notice anywhere about what was to come, or what was happening, and no clear lead up to what happened from this point on. This left many thousands of vulnerable people in a state of uncertainty with regard to almost all aspects of their lives. Care Experienced young people were not able to get any information to assist with planning ahead at this point either, and like many people including support workers and personnel, were unsure what to do.

On Monday 23rd of March 2020 the Scottish government announced an 'effective lockdown' of the country, schools, leisure facilities and hotels were already restricted or shutdown. This meant that there were bans on public gatherings of more than two people, shopping only for basic necessities once a day, exercise once a day alone and only travel was for medical reasons or travel for essential work. Police were directed to implement 'soft enforcement' prior to legal powers being taken later that week. Again, there was no clear guidance for how to respond or what to do, and this had a significant flow on effects for Care Experienced young people.

By Friday, 27 March 2020, the country was in full lockdown. 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. Shops and other retail environments that were allowed to remain open tried to implement a range of rules but, according to young people, these were confusing and served to lift anxiety

levels further. This meant that many young people simply retreated back to where they were living not knowing what to do.

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 increasing a sense of anxiety and isolation.

“I’m scared I’m going to die”

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. This raised anxiety levels significantly and they generally remained heightened for several months and the situation changed constantly and new, and more catastrophic information was shared by media and political leaders.

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.

“Its like we have been left to sort it out ourselves”

Current situation

As of August 2020, many services have reopened. People are required to wear facemasks on public transport and while shopping and there are strict conditions for entry into hotels other recreational and social environments. Importantly there is a very real risk of a second wave of the virus in winter or autumn and some predictions appear to be equally or more catastrophic than the first wave. While this is not known for sure, what is important is that strategies are implemented based on what we have learned through the first wave of this crisis that we can use into and prior to a second or more waves.

Key themed areas:

1. Lack of Available Information

“I don’t know what to do or where to go”

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 led to further anxiety and exacerbating existing mental and physical health issues for young people.

Other immediate impacts included the ability to get updated information related to job applications, housing, Universal Credit, social work intervention and support, understanding what the new rules were/are, and most importantly being able to get updated information on the wellbeing of family and friends with whom contact had been ceased or disrupted.

In addition, confusing messages from government about self-isolation, what new rules meant and how they should be applied, all increased general anxiety levels and the developing sense of distress at not knowing what to do. This was then made worse by rapidly changing guidelines, lack of planned communication processes, and inconsistent information, where any information was available.

What young people say needs to happen

We now know that there will be confusing and disjointed information in times of crisis. While there is little we can do about the content of the messaging, we can work on ensuring that there is a more organised process for ensuring information is delivered well. This could include:

- Updates and interpretations of complex government information
- Ensuring specific young people have understood the information and how it applies to them

2. Additional difficulties faced by young people out-with the city during the crisis

For young people living outside the city, the issues of not knowing what to do were reported by them at higher levels, and the result was often an increased sense of isolation, foreboding and anxiety.

The impacts on children and young people outside the city were many and varied and some were unique to that group of young people. The experience of one young person placed in Residential School in the central belt area was made more difficult by screening precautions preventing them from becoming integrated straight into their new living environment and protracting the settling in period. This only contributed to an already anxious situation for that young person.

This situation is summed up by a quote from the Children's Rights Service, *"(w)hat is a traumatic experience is amplified by the lack of normal contact increasing the feelings of separation/isolation"*. While this is related to the experience of a particular young person, it nevertheless highlights the experience for many young people and how fast normality and routine of expectation changed and increased a sense of isolation and fear.

Other young people living away from Aberdeen reflected this experience and also noted increased feelings of isolation, worry and fear. Each issue was addressed when discussed with the Development Officer during interviews as well. This included linking young people with nearby services, informing their workers in Aberdeen of their concerns (several said that were worried not to disturb their support workers during the crisis).

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

(Young person living near Glasgow)

What young people say needs to happen

Similar to other issues, we can plan to be inclusive of young people living away from the city. Young people said that having a phone call is really helpful for them,

“just to check in and hear a familiar person”

3. Isolation, digital access, and contact

“I keep thinking I’m going to die. I don’t want to die alone”

Isolation and issues related to isolation has been reported by almost every young person. It has been seen by children and young people to impact on a range of other areas of their experience, exacerbate existing issues and contribute to an increased sense of depression in young people. It is also seen by some support personnel to contribute to behaviours that place young people at greater risk of police involvement and breaking new rules, such as gathering in groups, attending parties etc.

Young people reported variously that there were impacts on their general health and routine, such as disturbed sleep patterns, sedentary living with little to no activity, recognising an increase unhealthy eating.

- **Household bubbles**

“Can I join your household bubble, there is no one for me to join?”

During the early stage of easing restrictions, government strategies included contact in a ‘household bubble’ whereby initially people from one household could gather with those of another. Young people living on their own noted that they had no one to connect with, and actively asked to be part of others household bubbles. This is a significant issue in that not having anyone with whom to connect only serves to exacerbate the already negative impact of isolation and loneliness for these young people.

- **Digital access**

While digital access worked well for young people, it was also intermittent. Broadly, there is an assumption among support personnel that internet access is the best way for young people to be in contact with others and that it is readily available; but this is not the case. The recent CELCIS report, *‘Bridging the digital divide for Care Experienced young people in Scotland, if not now, when?’* (July 2020), highlights the glaring issues related to a lack of access to reliable internet and web-based resources prior to lockdown.

This issue was only made much worse because of lockdown, with many young people reporting that they had little or no access for extended periods (up to several weeks in some cases) to internet. This meant that they had to visit with friends (a restricted activity) in order to try to deal with issues such as Universal Credit matter, housing issues, applying for support etc.

Virtual meetings such as CPCCs/LAC Reviews/Hearings. Support personnel report that these meetings became more difficult for young people to manage as they prefer face to face meetings where support and encouragement is easier to provide. In addition, many professionals have talked about their own difficulties with virtual meetings, including dealing with technology, learning about the digital space, virtual meetings, and online forums. This issue of professionals not being able to

understand or use digital formats has led to a number of cases of meetings being cancelled or postponed, or simply not occurring at all.

Amid all of this, the voice and participation of young people is severely impacted upon or becomes non-existent.

- **Social and physical contact.**

*“I never realised how much I miss just seeing people”.
“I’ve been so sad and lonely, and there is no one to just give me a hug”.*

This related to how young people have responded to and used digital platforms as a way to have contact, although they noted that it cannot replace physical contact, and this has increasingly become a significant issue. Most young people said that online activity began as a fun and relatively easy way to stay in touch. However, young people and support personnel noted consistently that increasingly numerous issues and challenges began to occur in relation to seeing friends and going out in the early stages of the crisis. This quickly became about simply seeing other people ‘face to face’ and beyond just seeing them online. For example, as the crisis continued young people began to report that they found FaceTime contact with family as being ‘boring’ in comparison with ‘real’ contact.

Several services noted that in their experience, they had to move to other platforms beyond email, text and on to Messenger, Facebook, and telephoning people. Others noted opening up their availability online to young people, increasing their active contact individually with young people. The Development Officer increased the use of a Facebook account to young people seeking contact (this meant turning it into a ‘work’ type account for young people to be able to contact). This has meant that young people have been able to contact the Development Officer at any time, sometimes including in the middle of the night when they are frightened.

There is a wide range of views from young people on how they have found digital use. In general, it is reasonably well received, and they recognise that it is what will work best. However, it does not take the place of face to face contact, and physical presence that they largely report as being an element of contact and communication that they miss. This has resulted in increased feelings of depression and anger, as well as anxiety in young people.

What young people say needs to happen

Young people have said that contact is a significant issue for them. They recognise that this will be impacted upon due to the nature of restrictions. However, prolonged use of single formats for predominantly digital contact becomes boring and unusable and young people will lose interest, as will almost all people.

Therefore, we should consider:

- Ensuring that all support personnel are up to date and trained on the use of digital technology in order to be able to use it themselves and support young people as well
- Consider broader use of social media platforms by professional and support personnel
- Overwhelmingly, what helped young people was the contact with those from whom they seek support.
- Using multiple platforms to have contact with family and friends
- Being creative in having ‘virtual party nights’, gathering etc online

4. Loneliness

“(loneliness) impacted me the way it impacted everyone else really – it was a slow build before I realised how much it was getting to me”

Leading directly from the issues of isolation, and contact (including digital contact), the issue of loneliness was raised consistently from all feedback from young people, support staff and anyone working with young people across all settings. Loneliness as experienced during the lockdown has led to a range of other deepening mental health issues, and other problems.

Young people widely reported that the sense of loneliness increased feelings of depression and anxiety in general. Young people said that they missed physical contact, hugs and just being with other people.

“I feel like the world is really ending, and I have no one to be with me”

More specifically, missing family members and being restricted from family contact, only served to increase a sense of anxiety and lack of control for young people in all settings. This often meant that there were further impacts across other areas such as leaving home without letting someone know, additional behavioural issues and increased risk of police contact.

Loneliness was increased when young people who were working were suddenly unemployed, or furloughed. This was also the case for young people attending school or college.

What young people say needs to happen

Young people have suggested that loneliness can be helped by people checking in on them. When this has occurred, young people said it was a significant help for them.

Some support personnel have noted that some young people have said that they were not needing as much contact and support and checking in. The good thing about this, is the option to say so rests with the young person and,

“(T)his is better that no one contacting you ever”

Young people have said that there needs to be continued checking in, visits where possible, and general contact to avoid the damage that loneliness can create.

5. Social work involvement, visits, and engagement

This is a widely noted issue throughout the UK and internationally. Social work visits for vulnerable children have been reduced and this has impacted upon other social work practice. However, young people who were interviewed overwhelmingly said that when they did have contact with social work, or other support people, they felt better and more positive. Even short telephone calls were seen as beneficial for young people.

Further, the content of the interaction was just as important the interactions itself. Young people said that having conversations about how others are experiencing the same issues, how support people are also struggling and just general discussions, were far better for them than conversations focussed on what they need to do in order to improve.

“Just talking to (Youth Team worker) about ordinary things was really nice”

- **Progress of assessments hindered.**

Children’s Rights noted significant issues in this regard, whereby the restriction brought to halt assessment processes that either involved supervised contact or re-integration visits home with a view to being allowed to return to Aberdeen. This has meant parents and children being separated for longer than planned, young people remaining away from home in residential care longer than planned and the likelihood any assessment planning processes will have to re-start from the beginning when they are able to begin.

- **Contact/consultations with young people by Rights Services since lockdown began.**

Direct contact has not been possible. Nevertheless, services report that alternatives have been found which, in some cases, have proved preferable for the young person involved. They note that some young people prefer text or phone calls to more formal meetings and that this has been useful for some.

There were issues reported that illustrate inconsistency between service providers with regard to contact within services and with social work staff as well. This ranged from toys and other equipment not being cleaned or hygienic enough (this is at pandemic levels of deep cleaning, not general cleaning) for use.

Other noted that constant social work contact with young people who were new to a service made their integration more challenging. Yet other services said that it appeared unusual to have so much contact.

Nevertheless, young people said that they were quite happy with the contact and felt confident to say so themselves, if they did not require it from social work if they did not want to engage.

“It was so lovely to connect with (Development Officer) on Facebook, we can just talk normally, and that helps”

What young people say needs to happen

Overall, young person said that they felt the contact they had with their social worker, or support personnel, was invaluable. They said that this should continue if there is a second regime of restrictions.

Young people also said:

- Generally, support personnel made regular, and positive contact with them and this was a significantly positive thing for them
- Contact should be casual and not always task focussed
- Hearing how workers struggle as well, made them feel like this was a shared experience and that they were not alone.

6. Police involvement, legal matters, and changing laws

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.

The main issues related to the first theme raised above whereby it is difficult for them to obtain clear, concise information about new rules. In addition, below are other areas related to this issue.

- **Fixed Penalty Notices and difficulties with Police making trauma informed allowances for Care Experienced young people.**

Some initial difficulties seem to have been resolved quite quickly but took longer in parts of Aberdeenshire and this had a particular impact on one young person and their foster carers. This included threats of imprisonment and fines that were not conducive to this young person's emotional wellbeing or their capacity to manage during the lockdown.

Young people in children's homes also noted concern at an increased risk of police involvement. These concerns were also supported and verified by staff in the homes.

- **Boredom**

Relieving boredom was not a matter of providing more activities. Young people reported that there was nowhere to go to get away from the house, or other people. They describe a lack of interest in other activities as restrictions continued and deepened.

Young people and support personnel reported that an increased sense of boredom lead to a higher use of cannabis, alcohol consumption and this led to increased risk of police contact and intervention.

This also had an impact in terms of debt to other people from whom they would borrow money to purchase cannabis or alcohol from others or use credit. Several young people have reported concerns in this regard and there is an increased level of vulnerability for these young people.

Although most services appear to have developed responsive contingencies, Care Experienced young people have been missing out on social activities in the community such as leisure centres, cinema, clubs etc. and this adds to the boredom, while another impact has been on young people with increased mobility or independence being unable to benefit from this.

Finally, some young people said that solicitors are not taking on new cases and two young people consulted with have said they have been unable to obtain support from a solicitor.

What young people say needs to happen

Young people have said that the use of police for minor and intermittent behavioural issues is not appropriate nor acceptable in a time of such crisis (this is not to suggest that all the issues involving police were minor or intermittent, we do not know what these issues involved, however young people are aware of such issues that did involve police). This response only serves to make situations far more volatile.

Young people also said:

- Police should be seen as helping rather than enforcing.
- Police should be called only where the situations are dangerous.
- Police can have an effect of frightening children and young people and relationships should be built up during times when this can occur.

Preparing for the second wave of restrictions

Young people are generally fearful of a second wave of restrictions and infection. However, it is important to note that they also feel that they know how to respond, albeit in a limited way. That said, this is not that same as feeling more able to cope or manage; young people did not say that and in fact, they remain fearful of all the thematic issues raised above.

This means that these thematic issues will remain alive and significant for young people should there be a second wave (or more) of restrictions.

Several services have already commenced some form of planning to deal with a second wave of restrictions, but these tend to be focussed on structural responses. These responses were noted in the feedback for this paper, but not included in detail as we are focussed on what young people want and have said here. Nevertheless, the additional feedback requires further discussion and we are aware that planning is underway irrespective.

Responses need to deal with the immediate issues that young people request support with, as well as the other structural issues from a service delivery perspective.

Young people say that they may not know what they need, but that they will need someone to assist them when they seek help.

The recommendations point to ways young people have suggested would help with a second wave and beyond, and these are based on their own experience. Young people are keen and willing to be involved in developing new responses to any second wave or beyond.