Delving deeper to come back stronger

Analysing the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on care-experienced young people and planning for brighter futures

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Abstract

For all pupils, the COVID-19 Lockdown has meant a dramatic loss of routine and structure. But for young people in the care system, schools closing often meant the disappearance of their only safe haven and community hub. Over spring 2020, we surveyed more than 1000 young people in or on the edge of the care system to understand their experience of lockdown. This article will expand on our first report, examining through segmentation the impact of age, gender and care status, and explore why even before lockdown care-experienced young people have lower levels of achievement compared to their peers. We will then focus on solutions, outline the steps MCR Pathways is taking and how we can reorient our communities and institutions to make sure all young people are defined by their talent, and never their circumstances. The article concludes with a vision for the future: a cultural shift which sees our economic recovery fused with social benefits and support for our most disadvantaged; a way forward where everyone benefits and has a role to play in ensuring an equality of opportunities and share in success.

Keywords

COVID-19, lockdown, young people, youth mentoring, education, Scotland

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"I was kicked out by my mum during this pandemic so that took a toll on my mental health followed by a breakup."

"It's been really hard to stay motivated to do work from home because I don't have a teacher explaining to me how to do it. It is also difficult not being able to see friends and stick to a normal routine because the days get all mixed up."

"Being in kinship care with my sister at this time has been hard, our relationship often isn't always the best and I'm really missing being able to have my weekly visits with my brother as well as seeing my mum and dad at least once a month."

"Being a young carer for my mum has made staying at home easier to do my caring role. But it has made it suffocating as there is no free time to get out and relax. Even going out feels stressful as keeping distance from people is hard to do in some circumstances. Lockdown has had a strong impact on a lot of young people's mental health in my age group including me and some of my friends."

A broken system and then lockdown

On 23 March 2020, across the UK and in Scotland, schools shut down. For all young people, this meant a dramatic loss of routine and structure. But for young people in the care system, schools closing often meant the disappearance of their only safe haven and community hub. Thousands of young people were left in limbo, without a voice or ability to influence what happened next. While professionals gathered and came up with plans, those hit the hardest were left adrift.

Our charity, MCR Pathways, supports young people in and on the edges of the care system. We recruit, train and match committed mentors with a young person who they support through weekly meetings. Meetings typically take place in school but, when lockdown began, we rapidly migrated our programme online to ensure young people didn't lose their mentor's vital support. By July, we reached 1,936 school pupils interacting with staff and mentors on our virtual mentoring platform.

Engaging so many young people was a major achievement, but equally an exceptionally challenging one. The devastation caused by loss of learning, compounded by damaged confidence and self-belief, was immediately evident. To make sure these young people's voices and stories were included in the recovery policies and decisions we had to gather comprehensive feedback.

From June through to July, we ran our lockdown survey to capture the experiences and challenges of our country's most disadvantaged. More than 1,000 young people took part, showing their strength and importance of their relationships with their MCR support, mentors and school. They told us about the toll lockdown has had on their mental health, the barriers they faced to home learning and more. Their bravery and resilience shone through. Despite the difficulties, the young people we support told us they still felt positive about their future and shared their ideas on how to come back stronger. Using their words as guidance, we compiled a report and introduced a series of recommendations to not only support their learning and development, but also tackle the severe mental distress faced during this time (MCR Pathways, 2020).

This article will expand on those findings, but with a more comprehensive and holistic approach, and explore why even before lockdown care-experienced young people have lower levels of achievement compared to their peers. Because for these young people, disruption, isolation and chaos is not a once in a lifetime, extraordinary event. This is often the status quo, and lockdown represents a lit match dropped in petrol, explosively compounding disadvantage and risking a lost generation. So, before we can properly understand the impact of the pandemic and set into motion real, practical solutions for our most disadvantaged, we have to understand the context of their lives before March 2020.

First, we'll examine the current state of care in Scotland and the changes that were being implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this, we will analyse the impact lockdown has had on care-experienced young people, touching on our initial report then using segmentation to further explore differences in experiences and sharing new recommendations. Next, the article will discuss the steps MCR Pathways is taking and how we can reorient our communities and institutions to make sure all young people are defined by their talent, and never their

circumstances. The article will conclude with a vision for the future: a cultural shift which sees our economic recovery fused with social benefits and support for our most disadvantaged; a way forward where everyone benefits and has a role to play in ensuring an equality of opportunities and share in success.

When reading this, please always remember that the data we cite, and the stories shared, are made up of individual young people. Young people who trusted us with their stories and truths. We must live up to that trust to listen, to empathise and reflect on what matters. Only when we incorporate their voices and views can we build back better.

> Late last year my home circumstances changed and I moved. But slowly things started to go wrong. I tried to pretend to everyone around about me that things were fine, but they weren't. For some reason I shut down and didn't share with anyone how bad things had got. I was in a dark place. Normally I would talk to (my mentor) Giulio or Angela, my coordinator, but I just couldn't. I ended up homeless on Christmas Eve. Thankfully a family member took me in, but only until social work offices opened on the 27th. Then I found myself at 17 moving into a homeless unit for young men. My sister was there for me. She had been on the programme. She called the team and they just came in and helped me. It's hard when you are in a dark place to ask for help and I am so glad my sister did ask for me. I had people I could rely on, no fuss, just be there for me. I am in a much better place.

The state of care in care of the state

When life at home is unstable and the floor is always threatening to collapse, just getting by becomes the goal. But this survival mode makes it nearly impossible to plan for a brighter future, and unfortunately outcomes for care-experienced young people reflect this.

According to the most recently available government reports, 42%, or just over two in five, care-experienced pupils left school in 4th year compared to just 12% for all

pupils in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020). Just 35% of S5 care-experienced pupils achieved one or more qualification at SCQF level 5 or above, compared to the 85% national figure (Scottish Government, 2020). Poverty, instability, and family crises scar for a lifetime. The Scottish Prison Service's most recent Survey for Looked After Young People found that just under half (46%) of young people in custody had spent time in care as children (2018). Who Cares? Scotland (2020) cites that practitioners estimate between 30-50% of individuals who are homeless could be care-experienced. Within a year of leaving care, 38% of care-experienced young people were unemployed and not in school compared to just 5% of their peers (Scottish Government, 2020).

These are the outcomes we work every day to prevent. We know that care-experienced young people are just as talented, hardworking and smart as their peers. It is their deeply chaotic home lives that prevent them from achieving more in their education, all through no fault of their own. But with the right support, these young people can thrive.

> I initially did well at school but my dyslexia led to me falling behind quite quickly, becoming disengaged from school and insecure about my ability. This would result in me entering high school unable to read, spell or write, ride a bike, swim or tie my shoelaces. Despite numerous programmes that intervened and ultimately failed to help me.

Policies: the potential for change?

Since 2017, the Scottish Government has shown a commitment to reducing the gap that exists between those with care experience and those without. They have implemented a number of policies to support young people in education and beyond.

In 2019, the government removed the age 26 cap on the care-experienced bursary, building on further extensions in 2018 which saw the bursary raised from £7,625/year to £8,100 (Scottish Government, 2019). First introduced in 2017, the bursary is now also available to young people studying at Further Education, in

addition to Higher Education. Also, in 2019, the Government announced that all care-experienced applicants who meet minimum entry requirements will be guaranteed a university place. Beginning in 2020, Scottish universities will be introducing new minimum requirements for care-experienced individuals and those living in SIMD20 postcodes[1] (Universities Scotland, 2019).

The keystone change came in February 2020 with the publication of the Independent Care Review's three-year study - Scotland's most comprehensive analysis into the challenges facing care-experienced individuals. The Review Panel conducted more than 5,500 interviews with children, young people and adults who have been through the 'Care System', as well as professionals working within care — including those from education, the public sector and the third sector. *The Promise*, the Review's central document, outlines what changes Scotland must make to make sure care-experienced young people feel loved and have a safe and happy childhood (2020).

Over the past three years, MCR Pathways has closely supported each stage of the Review. Young people and Ambassadors from Young Scottish Talent (MCR Pathway's title for the programme for young people) took part in the 1,000 Voices campaign and shared their mentoring and care experience with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, civil servants and the Review's Chair, Fiona Duncan, and her team.

The Review urgently outlines the need for people that form the wider support structure — in education, community groups, third sector organisations and in the public sector — to be empowered to create personal relationships with care-experienced young people. The thousands of interviews showed clearly that these relationships are the foundation to ensure young people feel loved and supported.

At MCR, we have always known that it is these relationships that make the fundamental difference and our model simply reflects that. We recruit, train and match volunteer mentors with a young person based on personality, experiences and the young person's career goals. Crucially, mentors aren't there because they have to be, they're building a relationship with a young person because they care.

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[1] SIMD20 = Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation – 20% most deprived data zones.

This foundation of care, active listening, nonjudgement and support is what makes mentoring so effective.

The power of mentoring was highlighted in the Care Review, which found that, 'Mentoring has a significant positive impact on children and young people who receive it, with evidence that it can improve educational attainment. Schools must be supported to encourage and develop mentoring relationships for those who would benefit' (*The Promise*, 2020, p. 71). This finding backs up further research which shows the life-changing impact of mentoring.

In 2020, ScotCen, one of the UK's leading social research institutes, released their three-year study (commissioned by The Robertson Trust) which rigorously analysed the impact of MCR mentoring. ScotCen are the Scottish arm of NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research agency. Using internationally recognised, qualitative and quantitative research methods, this three-year evaluation rigorously analysed the data and interviewed young people, mentors and school staff. What the report found was transformational.

ScotCen found that 70.7% of mentored pupils continued their education in S5, compared to 39% of non-mentored care-experienced young people nationally. 87.8% achieved at least one or more SCQF Level 5 qualification(s), compared with 58.3% of their non-mentored care-experienced peers. Finally, 81.6% of mentored care-experienced pupils left school for college, university or a job, compared with 59.8% of those young people not being mentored (ScotCen, 2020).

2020 began with the publication of *The Promise*, by the Independent Care Review. It urgently called for the Scottish Government, charities and other organisations to create a new framework for supporting care-experienced young people and ensure that they had the tools and relationships to be the masters of their own destiny. With the expansion of MCR into new local authorities, Scotland committed practically to give care-experienced young people the support they deserved. While outcomes remained exceptionally poor for these young people, this momentum promised a new way forward. But the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a whole new wave of instability which threatens to not only halt this progress, but to reverse it. Delivering on the Promise is now needed more than ever.

In this next section, we'll examine the impact of the lockdown on our most disadvantaged and the practical steps we can take to ensure they are not left behind. What is needed now whilst the Promise is delivered.

> I think it's just not knowing. The fear that none of us really understand what is going on, and on top of that trying to figure out a place to live after lockdown with Social Work. I've been trying to remain positive but it's really hard in times like these.

> From already having anxiety and depression before lockdown, it has made my mental health a lot worse. Without social interaction it makes you second guess your place in people's lives if you're not there with them to see where you fit in. And when you're bored it's easier to overthink things when you have nothing better to do.

The reality of lockdown - through the lens of young people

Between June and July, more than 1,000 young people provided us with insight into their experiences of lockdown. The scope of our survey extended far beyond school, and included focused questions on mental wellbeing, home learning, and impact on career plans and future expectations. The findings are fully representative of the views of Scotland's most disadvantaged young people, with responses coming from those living in cities, towns, rural, and island areas. The MCR lockdown survey demonstrates that whilst young people across the country have struggled through lockdown, for those with experience of the care system or in other ways disadvantaged challenges were significantly magnified.

Many of these young people already faced multiple barriers preventing them from engaging with education and home study, including lack of IT equipment, no or unreliable internet connections, chaotic households, historic family disengagement with education, limited space to study, and caring responsibilities. COVID-19 and lockdown served to compound and intensify many of these challenges. By reaching our most vulnerable young people, we are able to provide insight into those who need the most help.

Of the 1,325 young people who submitted responses, 1,005 provided detailed and comprehensive feedback. 56.1% of responders are care-experienced, either currently in the care system (34.4%) or have been previously (21.7%). 43.9% of the young people are on the edges of the care system, experiencing various forms of disadvantage. 60.1% of the young people were identified as female, whilst 39.1% were identified as male (Data on gender was extracted from SEEMiS[2] and may not exactly reflect every young person's gender identity). The results of the report were striking. Compared to our initial findings, the further analysis that follows delves deeper into the role that age, gender and care status also played on mental wellbeing, home learning and hopes for the future. In addition to the young people in or on the edge of the care system surveyed, we also gathered feedback from a further 300 non care-experienced young people from across the country to act as a comparison.

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Mental Health - age and gender impact

For many, lockdown and COVID-19 has put a strain on mental wellbeing. To capture the full extent of the impact, we asked young people not only about mental wellbeing directly, but also about sleep, worries, and how they've been spending their time.

A large majority of young people told us that their mental health had suffered since the start of lockdown. Two thirds (66.8%) of young people reported feeling low, more anxious and stressed. Compared to boys, girls reported significantly worsened mental wellbeing, with 75% telling us that they were experiencing these feelings. A quarter of girls reported feeling much more anxious and stressed. For many

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[2] Education management system used in Scotland

however, these challenges aren't new. Nearly one in 5 girls and one in 10 boys reported previously experiencing poor mental health.

These gender differences are also apparent later in the survey, when we asked about the reasons why young people haven't been able to complete their schoolwork. Some 45% of girls indicated anxiety or stress as a barrier to their home learning, compared to 37% of boys.

In general, there was a strong correlation between age and mental wellbeing. Some 46% of S3 young people reported feeling fine and unchanged compared to only 15.8% of school leavers, showing the increased pressure on older pupils. Older pupils were also much more likely to say that they had previously experienced poor mental wellbeing - with only 7% of S3[3] pupils indicating this compared to nearly one-third (29.8%) of school leavers.

There was not a significant difference in mental health between our comparator schools and MCR young people. More than half of young people from comparator schools responded that they were feeling more anxious, though 38.8% report no change in mental wellbeing - seven percentage points higher than MCR young people. This shows that safeguarding mental health must be a high priority in all schools and for all young people.

> I tend to stay up and say to myself I'll go to sleep at such a time
> and then I never stick to what I say, so my sleeping schedule is
> quite varied. I don't know how I'll manage to get up for school again
> as I'm so used to the long mornings.

Understanding changes in sleep patterns was another way to clearly see the impact of lockdown. An overwhelming (88.8%) of young people told us their sleeping patterns have changed and over a quarter (26.5%) said they were experiencing significantly disrupted sleep. While both boys and girls reported significant sleep disruption, 86% and 92% respectively, girls experienced much more drastic changes. Alarmingly, over a third of girls told us that they were experiencing

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[3] S3 = third year of secondary school, or approximately age 13-14.

extremely disrupted sleep, often sleeping fewer than 6 hours a night, compared to 16% of the boys.

Looking at the comparator schools, the impact on sleeping patterns is less dramatic with only 42% of young people reporting less or varied sleep compared to almost 65% of MCR young people. Notably, only 12% of young people from the comparator school report severely disrupted sleep, compared to a quarter of MCR young people.

> My school has given me work but I have no motivation to do any of it due to my own anxieties and personal issues at home.

> I always do the work but it can take a lot of time because of the internet in my house.

Inequality of home learning and concerns about school

Between the first day of lockdown and the first day of term, young people in Scotland were out of school for six months. Whilst the restrictions apply to all young people, their experiences have varied drastically. Between 15,000-20,000 of our most vulnerable may be experiencing digital exclusion, meaning they do not have the IT equipment or internet connection needed to keep up with their work online or stay in contact with their support network (SCVO, 2020). Let us not wrap this up in adult speak. Young people who are excluded know they are and are made to feel inferior and that they do not matter. Think about how that feels. Then take yourself back into your younger self, when confidence matched experience.

To understand their circumstances better, we asked young people about their experience of online learning during lockdown. Caring responsibilities, disruption at home, and mental wellbeing struggles are just a few of the barriers that young people told us kept them from engaging with home learning.

In our main report, we found that 68.2% of MCR young people did not use any learning materials provided by the school. Of those, 42.5% told us they were too stressed and anxious. Significantly, over a quarter had caring duties that impacted on their capacity for home learning.

Fewer than half of boys and girls reported working through coursework over lockdown, but boys were more likely to say that they had (41% compared to 31%). Both said their coursework being 'hard to understand' (41.5% and 55.8%) and anxiety (37.7% and 45.6%) were their two primary barriers.

Age was not strongly correlated with young people's engagement with their education. Young people in key exam years, 4th and 5th year, were more likely than other pupils to say that they struggled to understand the work they were given, though broadly age was not a significant factor impacting why young people were not able to complete their schoolwork.

Looking against the comparator school survey, 55% of young people said they used home learning materials compared to just 31.8% of MCR young people. This may imply better support or encouragement at home, greater access to space and IT equipment or generally higher engagement with their school. While 26.7% of MCR young people told us that they had caring responsibilities at home, less than 10% of those in the comparator survey said the same.

Care experience status did not measurably influence whether young people used their home learning material. However, the barriers to learning did diverge. Care-experienced young people were more likely to tell us that they didn't have the time (19.5% against 11.3%) and that they had other responsibilities at home (33.1% against 22.6%).

> I stay with a lot of people which include five younger siblings, three of which are under the age of five. This makes it hard to find a bit of peace to do the work. My house also doesn't have a dining table or desk area to do it meaning I usually have to sit on my bed not getting the peace I need as I share a room.

In our main report we found that 14.5% of young people do not have IT and internet access and nearly two in ten (19.5%) do not have the space at home. There is no significant difference from male to female respondents on constraint to learning at home, which would be expected. There were also no strong comparisons to draw in relation to age. However, 15% of school leavers reported that they did

not have the necessary IT equipment — higher than any other age group. This is especially concerning for young people leaving for college or university.

> I don't have a laptop or iPad to study. I use my phone and can't send word documents or any important work to teachers. My phone's messed up.

MCR young people report a significantly bigger challenge in working from home. Only 13% of comparator school young people said they did not have the space and equipment required, compared to nearly one third (29%) of MCR young people.

> I feel that lockdown has affected how I will cope with National 5[4] subjects. I was already worried and now I'm even more concerned. I think that the pressure of a pandemic, going back to school and my recent home life issues, including being kicked out, will be too much stress and strain on my mental health which will lead me to not doing great on my National 5s. This means that if I don't pass I won't get the amount of Highers I need for college or uni.

Leaving school and hopes for the future

Lockdown has the potential to cause a severe and lasting impact on young people's education, careers and future plans. For those already on the edge of education prior to lockdown, who struggle with engagement and attendance, it is absolutely essential that we rebuild their support networks. In this section, we asked young people if lockdown had affected their plans for the future and what most concerned them about their next steps after leaving school.

Encouragingly, the majority of MCR young people still feel optimistic about their plans when they leave school. Demonstrating resilient attitudes, 64.8% of young people say that COVID-19 has not changed their future plans. Only 15.2% are no longer sure what they will do when they leave.

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[4] National 5 awards are intermediate level awards in Scotland's qualifications system, normally assessed by a combination of external examination and coursework, and roughly equivalent to GCSE awards in the rest of the UK.

There were moderate gender differences in young people's plans for their future. Boys were more likely to feel certain in their future plans, leading girls by eight percentage points. Girls were most likely to opt to change their chosen pathway than boys, 22.9% of girls hoping to stay in school longer now against 15% of boys.

There is little variation between MCR and other young people — 67% of those asked in comparator schools said they were thinking the same compared to 64% of MCR pupils.

> It will affect the job industry and work experience part because for what I want to do when I leave school, I need a lot of work experience. I'm also concerned about how it will affect my family.

If there's one thing you take away from our survey it is this: those leaving school in 2020 urgently need support. Failing them now will have lasting consequences. Our report starkly showed how uncertain school leavers feel about their next steps. For those in care, leaving school can often coincide with having to move on from where they live. Of those leaving school, just 38.5% are feeling confident about their next steps. The majority are worried they won't get into their chosen university or college or are unsure what to do next. The Prince's Trust, a UK charity that supports young people, found that 41% of surveyed young people think their dreams are impossible to achieve due the pandemic. 48% of those from poorer backgrounds said they feel they will never succeed in life (The Prince's Trust, 2020).

Our analysis finds that this is not a gender issue, roughly the same number of boys and girls felt ok about their next steps (33.3% against 38.9%, respectively). However, care experience status did have a significant impact on young people's concerns about leaving school. Just 15.5% of care-experienced young people feel ok about their next steps, compared to 44.4% of their non-care-experienced peers. These young people know the uncertainty ahead of them, often coming from significantly households facing adversity, and know they may not have family support to fall back on. We need a plan now. We cannot let a second pandemic of hopelessness overtake our nation's young people.

There is no singular lockdown experience, but these stats and stories offer a glimpse into how our society's most vulnerable have experienced this crisis. But despite the devastation the pandemic has wrought, we believe that it also represents a major opportunity to reform our systems. We can do better than building back our economic structures where inequality is the norm, and instead fuse economic recovery with innovative social policy.

Future — A deliverable vision where economic success drives social benefit AND vice versa

> Since meeting my mentor I've had such a better mindset than ever before. I used to be stressed about exams all the time and I had no confidence in myself at all, but my mentor has helped me realise that I need to start believing in myself and do what's best for me instead of always putting other people first. If it wasn't for my mentor, I think this year at school would have been a lot more difficult.

In our lockdown survey, young people shared their honest and often heart-breaking experiences — now it is time to use their words to guide and define recovery. Young people overwhelmingly state that MCR mentoring is vital to their success. We believe and are working to ensure that every care-experienced and disadvantaged young person has the support of a mentor and is engaged in the MCR Pathways programme. More critical now than ever, one-to-one relationships are a key way to rebuild confidence and aspiration to avoid a lost COVID generation.

Open, positive, motivated, committed, resilient, intelligent, entrepreneurial, socially driven, inclusive and deeply caring. This is the MCR approach. For more than a decade, we have supported Scotland's care-experienced and most disadvantaged young people to achieve what all young people deserve: a fair chance. MCR works with more than 2,500 young people each week across 12 local authorities and will support 4,000 in 2021. At every step, young people told us what challenges they faced, what had failed them, and what gave them the motivation, commitment and resilience to keep going. Working daily with young people has taught us that relationships are the key to unlocking potential.

We currently have just over 1,500 mentors actively supporting young people, with an additional 1,200 in the pipeline preparing for mentoring. The reason why we are so determined to reach as many young people as possible is because mentoring works — it dramatically reduces the attainment gap between care-experienced young people and their peers.

We have built an inclusive mentoring community in partnership with each local authority by engaging with local businesses, organisations, educational institutions and individuals. We recruit volunteers of all ages — 66% of our mentors are aged between 25-54, in the peak of their careers. Our mentors are from a diverse range of cultures, nations, faiths and backgrounds. We actively encourage inclusion and diversity, for example by making links with a range of religions and communities including LQBTQ+. By recruiting volunteers from all walks of life we are helping create stronger and more representative community ties. This also builds empathy and a deeper understanding between different aspects of communities.

Over the next three years, MCR Pathways' goal is to reach 10,000 young people across the UK. We are expanding into England and plan to bring the life changing impact of mentoring to young people across the country, helping to eliminate the attainment gap. MCR has been approached by delegates from Norway, Australia and Spain, showing international interest in this unique approach for supporting disadvantaged young people. In the longer term, we aspire to bring our unique, transformative programme to the international stage.

We want to make relationship-focused mentoring an educational right for all care-experienced young people and have our approach supported by policy. This means securing long term education funding from governments to support equality in school engagement, achievement, and progression to positive destinations for our most disadvantaged young people. Ultimately, we will help deliver on *The Promise* set out by the Scottish Care Review, which includes making mentoring a right for those who need it. Urgently highlighted in the Care Review is the need to seek young people's opinions and involve them when making decisions and policy changes about the Care System. This has been central to MCR philosophy since our inception. We will continue to ensure that young people's views and feedback are systematically gathered and included in discussions and decisions that affect them.

But our vision for the future extends even beyond this. We hope that the pandemic and resulting lockdown brings into focus the inherent inequality in our systems. This is an unprecedented time and that unlocks a rare chance to fundamentally adjust our society to put the needs of our most disadvantaged at the centre and finally break the cycle of poverty and heartbreak.

Commit and participate in fusing social and economic success.

First step — listen to those with lived experience then respectfully disrupt

As we emerge from the pandemic, the greatest challenge is to not repeat our mistakes and rebuild inequality and its destructive power. We cannot swing from one extreme to another, from austerity, to free spending, to bankruptcy. We can move beyond polarising party politics or divisive negotiations where one side looks to win at the expense of the other.

To create a system that benefits all we need a diversity of perspectives. There are two preconditions. Those with direct or lived experience need to be co-creators, front and centre. It also needs effective leadership that is listening first, relationship based secondly, building consensus with clarity on actions. This needs to be respectfully disruptive, as no-one likes or embraces change. It must be engaging, with a place for all views to be heard and brave enough to call out and topple those with a vested interest.

This transformation needs a relationship-first approach with social inclusion, social mobility and social contribution as three governing principles and essential component parts. Economic success and recovery are vital, but we need this to drive social benefits or we will continue the exact same cycle. We need them fused, as two sides of the same coin.

Social Inclusion means everyone has a basic right to nutrition, a home, internet access, quality education and health and wellbeing. It needs investment, but this investment will generate cost savings in both the short and the long term. Early

intervention models demonstrate significant savings, but it means investment now to safeguard our future. What we have struggled to accept or deal with is that the savings come from different institutions, departments and budgets. Social mobility means a true equality of education outcomes, job choices and subsequent life chances. It is simply about each individual realising their potential irrespective of their circumstances.

Social contribution is where organisations demonstrate their commitment, but in a manner where they also make significant gains. A contribution that drives wide-ranging corporate benefits for sustainability, and not based on fashion. This is the next generation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Indeed, an increasing number of businesses are seeing the benefits of aligning their strategy to social purpose. It is a two-way process where all parties benefit, both giver and receiver and has already been shown to drive share price and brand value. Rather than haphazardly adopting short term, low impact volunteer or fundraising initiatives, CSR should be grounded in effectiveness with a focus on reaching the largest possible number of recipients.

To this end, organisations need to realise that this is not a cost, but indeed a net benefit. By supporting staff's active engagement in high impact initiatives, they see an enormous boost in workplace engagement. Research shows that volunteers mentors sharpen essential workplace skills including listening, coaching and communication skills — qualities vital for leadership roles.

These gains translate into benefits for employers as increased employee engagement drives improved productivity and profitability — both by over 20% (evidenced in research from 263 studies covering 49 industries and 192 organisations in 34 countries). Focused, local community-based volunteering can increase employee engagement and the gains in mental health and wellbeing are profound (Gallup, 2016).

This is where programmes like MCR mentoring fit. The MCR Pathways programme is a foundation for social inclusion, social mobility and a way for individuals and organisations to make social contributions. Reaching more young people will require us to create new partnerships with private, public, and third sector organisations.

By sharing the benefits of mentoring to all involved, we have fostered relationships with committed and senior stakeholders in organisations to mentor, act as champions and endorse the MCR message. Sharing both stats and stories on how the MCR model materially benefits all participants is key. We plan to continue developing on our reimagined vision of Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Parenting, highlighting the value mentoring brings not only to young people, but also mentors and organisations alike.

Any change such as this requires leadership, focus and a measured outcome. Effective leadership requires active listening skills, empathy and trusting relationships. Inclusion is not about one political party doing what they think is best. It is about engaging, listening, creating choices and teamwork. We have more than enough evidence of what works. With social inclusion as first base, it gives us the ability to build the second in social mobility.

We can refresh and re-energise our institutions and governments with this approach. Make contradictions work, let them spark creativity. We are joined by the need to recover and build a sustaining economy.

Young people across the country have lost out on their schooling, their social lives, and potentially their futures. Many have given up their jobs and first steps in Higher and Further education to keep our most vulnerable safe. More than any other group, young people are bearing the economic brunt of COVID-19 now and in the future. We must not forget the cost to them and leave them alone with this extraordinary burden to carry and deal with. Now is the time to make the changes that we know we must. We owe it to them.

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About the author

Scottish entrepreneur and philanthropist, Professor Iain MacRitchie has transformed 18 organisations – from 50 to 5000 employees – and has acted as trusted adviser to over 100 others. An expert in leading large-scale organisational change, Iain has a track record in helping develop teams and individuals to realise their full potential.

After founding MCR Pathways in 2007, Iain now volunteers full-time as Chairman of the revolutionary mentoring and talent development programme. His goal is to establish MCR as a national education model to ensure that all care-experienced and disadvantaged young people are defined by their talents and potential, never their circumstances.