



Response to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee's Inquiry into Support for vulnerable children during the Coronavirus outbreak'

May 2020

CELGIS is Scotland's Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde. We are thankful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee's Inquiry into 'Support for vulnerable children during the Coronavirus outbreak'.

Introduction

The population of babies, children and young people who are in need of care and protection is varied and their backgrounds are similarly diverse, but some will have experienced multiple, serious adversities, including socio-economic disadvantage, parental drug and alcohol misuse, and domestic violence. Care experienced children and young people are significantly more likely to have particular physical health conditions, poorer mental health (even when poverty and disadvantage are accounted for), and face multiple barriers when it comes to addressing such difficulties. Educational outcome indicators also show that the gap between looked after children's attainment and achievement, and that of all children, remains unacceptably large. The Coronavirus outbreak, and the public health protection response, will undoubtedly disproportionately impact vulnerable children and families and we welcome the commitment from the committee to understand and address the needs that care experienced children, young people and their families will be experiencing in these unprecedented time.

The information contained within this submission is drawn from research evidence, practice experience and feedback from our long-standing, cross organisational networks, comprising of practitioners and leaders working across the spectrum of children's services and other public services in support of children. These networks include professionals from the fields of education, social work, health, and third sector, private and voluntary organisations. We also engage with a number of communities with lived experience. The evidence contained within is not presented as nationally representative, but as a snapshot of how the current situation is being experienced by children and young people, their families, carers and practitioners in local areas.

Within this submission we have endeavoured to provide the Committee with the information that the inquiry is focused on in relation to each of the question areas. In addition to this, we have taken the opportunity to highlight key themes which have been raised through our work with stakeholders that the committee may wish to consider as part of its work, due to their significance in relation to vulnerable children and families.

We have been struck by the level of commitment, creativity and innovation within the sector in supporting children and families during this crisis. The sector has demonstrated a high level of adaptability, flexibility and innovation to ensure families are supported and basic needs met. These innovations are subverting previous existing bureaucratic processes, which can be stigmatising at times. We need to evaluate the impact of this and consider whether these practices should be retained and scaled-up in order to realise the ambitions of The Promise of the Independent Care Review.

Do you have any information to share on the extent to which food is reaching the children who need it most?

As the Committee will be aware, there are a variety of methods which have been put in place by local authorities to provide Free School Meals (FSM) to those families who are eligible. In discussions with stakeholders it is becoming clear that there is a level of inconsistency both in what is being provided – food, or vouchers, or cash payments – and how these are being distributed to families.

When addressing the issue of whether food is reaching the children who need it the most, it is important to consider the data available. The Scottish Government's recent data intelligence report ¹ estimated that around 140,000 free school meals, or equivalent, were being provided each day; 18,000 more than the 122,000 children eligible for them through means testing. It is important to note however that in 2018 the Scottish Government's universal free school meals programme, which provides free meals to all children in P1 – P3, regardless of family circumstances, provided 169,367 under normal circumstances.² Therefore, there are risks that children and families who do not meet the means testing criteria, but rely on FSM are at risk of food poverty. Many families are also experiencing a reduction, or eradication, of income and will have access to less disposable income than under normal circumstances. This will further heighten the risk of children being hungry and having no access to food.

The Independent Care Review³ recognised poverty as one of the mediating factors that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect. Highlighting that families who lack the financial resources, or who struggle to put food on the table, are more vulnerable. The Coronavirus outbreak has amplified and exacerbated many issues facing families across Scotland. Youthlink Scotland found through a survey of their members ⁴ that 92% of services had moved their delivery online. For many families, the closure of physical community spaces has removed a vital lifeline of support for food, health or community networks. Many families are at home and worried about leaving the house, yet are unable to afford food deliveries, or be recognised as priority groups to access food deliveries.

We would strongly urge the Committee to request that Scottish Government ensures that local authorities are still providing universal FSM provision for all P1 – P3 children and to relax the rules regarding evidencing of income for the means tested FSM grant during the Coronavirus outbreak to ensure that those who will newly meet the FSM means tested criteria can access this support without delay.

We are also acutely aware that care leavers are facing the impacts of reduced access to services, and by extension access to supportive agencies who can provide food and hygiene products. There have been examples of some local authorities and third sector providers being proactive in engaging with and supporting care leavers living independently by dropping off food parcels and other household essentials when young people are in particular need and have either run out of money or can't source what they need locally. However, this is problematic for those care leavers who were not in contact with services before the Coronavirus outbreak as these young people will be on the periphery and will have found it difficult to work with services in the past. Local authorities have Corporate Parenting responsibilities in respect of their young people. Prioritisation of care experienced young people during this situation, in line with statutory responsibilities, to ensure their welfare should be viewed as paramount.

Are there any issues with certain ways of providing food, any particular barriers that need to be addressed?

As previously discussed, local authorities are using a variety of methods to provide FSM. Information from our networks indicate that there are three main methods being used:

- Supermarket vouchers
- Provision of either hot or cold meals which can be picked up from hubs or dropped off to families
- Cash payments; some of which are paid directly into parents'/carers' bank accounts and some which can be picked up from local hubs or offices

We acknowledge that this is an unprecedented situation and local authorities have had to provide a rapid response in ensuring provision of FSM. Many areas have expressed their regret at not being able to consult with families on how they could best provide this support and frustration with process and governance inhibiting flexibility in the approach they can take.

There are significant opportunities here to engage and collaborate with families to understand individual circumstance and need. We believe that there is no one approach that will meet the needs of all families and that, a more appropriate way of ensuring that children's food needs are met would be to offer a range of options that families can choose from.

Families and practitioners have told us that they feel the use of supermarket vouchers can be stigmatising and impractical; families can feel embarrassed using them, there can be technical issues which prevent them working and it may actually cost the family money, or be impractical, to travel to the supermarket which the voucher has been provided for. Additionally, providing vouchers that can only be redeemed in retailers who do not offer home delivery, places additional barriers on vulnerable families.

Some local areas are continuing to make either packed or hot lunches which can be picked up at local hubs by families or dropped off by council staff. Whilst there may be benefits to this approach by providing hot food where otherwise children may not get a hot meal, we have received concerns from practitioners that some families are not willing to travel to hubs to collect food for a range of reasons including; stigma or shielding for health reasons, in addition to a range

of complex home circumstances which can make it difficult for parents/carers to maintain normal routines and structures such as mental health issues, drug and alcohol use and domestic violence. There may also be costs involved for families in travelling to collect lunches.

Cash payments are an alternative option to vouchers and for many families, would alleviate some of the practical and, importantly, ethical issues which can be involved with issuing vouchers or food. We are aware though that many parents and carers may not have access to bank accounts where money can be deposited. Some parents may also be experiencing financial strain which could necessitate the use of an overdraft and, depending on terms and conditions, could see FSM deposits used by banks to cover overdraft or other banking charges, without parents/carers being able to intervene in this.

Some local authorities are using mobile technology, where available, to send money via Paypal and Paypoint or Payzone terminals or the Post Office. Care leavers in some local authorities are finding this method of accessing funding, when they have no access to a bank account, helpful and have said that this feels more dignified than receiving a voucher.

We would urge the Committee to ask Scottish Government to work with COSLA and local authorities to ensure that families are provided with flexibility, choice and autonomy in the decisions that affect their lives. This should include in this instance a choice between food vouchers, cash payments or packed/hot lunches. We are also aware of a huge reliance in many areas on local third sector support, being made possible through the hard work of community volunteers, and would encourage local authorities to continue to work with the third sector to make best use of all available resources. We would also encourage a participatory and collaborative approach in this regard to ensure that parents/carers voices are heard and considered throughout the consultation and implementation process.

What level of provision exists for children and young people with complex ASN in school/childcare hubs?

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 promotes the interests of looked after children by stating that they are presumed to have additional support needs unless assessed as otherwise. However, as data released by local authorities via a Freedom of Information request⁵ shows, such duties towards looked after children are being inconsistently implemented across Scotland, with some councils only assessing a small proportion of eligible children. This raises concern around the number of children and young people with care experience that local authorities will be assessing in regards to their need, or otherwise, for a place in school or childcare hubs.

Figures obtained by [TES](#) from Scottish Government in April showed that just over 6,000 children per day were attending childcare hubs⁶. This data does not differentiate between children of key workers and those children assessed as vulnerable or having additional support needs, therefore it is not possible to gain a robust understanding of how many care experienced children are being supported through child care hubs. The Committee may want to consider how data being collected from local authorities could be used to more accurately understand how many vulnerable children are being supported through attendance at hubs.

We also understand from feedback through our networks that some vulnerable young people are being offered support in hubs on a part time or flexible basis. This flexibility, based on an individual needs assessment, is welcomed and should be encouraged to ensure that children and families are able to access timely, appropriate and proportionate support in a way that is helpful for them and their parents/carers.

In regards to specific provision which exists for children with additional support needs, there is varied information being shared by local authorities. Whilst many are taking creative and innovative approaches to working with children, and their families, in new ways, access to technology has been cited as a barrier by some practitioners. There is a new and emerging awareness of digital exclusion issues for children and families in Scotland, however local authority staff are also finding that a lack of access to the required IT equipment a barrier to supporting children with home learning, particularly those with complex needs. Some of the specific issues raised relate to having to use personal computer equipment, not having access to specific computer programmes used in schools, local authority firewalls preventing access to platforms and programmes that children are familiar with and parents/carers not being familiar or comfortable enough with technology to be able to support children to work with teachers whilst at home.

We would continue to stress the importance of hubs being viewed as one, amongst a range, of additional supports available to children and families during this time.

Are there appropriate places at school/childcare hubs or in private nurseries available?

Information received from CELCIS networks suggest that criteria for referral to hubs was initially very rigid, with only children of key workers, or children on the child protection register being allocated places. However we have received feedback that since the Easter holidays, this criteria has been relaxed in some areas with practitioners able to 'refer in' to hubs for families that they know, who would benefit from the additional support. We welcome this development and would encourage a continued flexible use of spaces within hubs. There are examples of children in children's houses and foster care placements now able to access hubs on a part-time basis, as it has been assessed that continuing relationships with their network of trusted adults, in environments where they feel comfortable, is a protective factor for their wellbeing, and also reduces the risk of placement breakdown. These practices have been possible within the current social distancing and public health guidelines and are examples of creative and thoughtful approaches being tailored to fit the needs of individual young people.

Regardless of spaces available within hubs, or the uptake of places for those children allocated a space, we are aware of a number of challenges facing care experienced children and families.

For those families who may not be able to access support in the form of a hub, they may already be struggling with multiple issues and are now faced with having children and young people with a range of educational, social and

emotional needs at home without the range of supports and protective measures offered in a school environment. Heightened fear and anxiety coupled with the reduction of choices at this time can present families with significant challenges and therefore the support and help they receive during this crisis is essential. Many vulnerable children and families may already be living with the impact of poverty and will, as a first step, require practical support to access food, power and ongoing financial support. Many families may now be pushed into the 'vulnerable' category, reaching a tipping point for those who may have lost temporary or insecure work or those previously self-employed. Tangible support provided by third sector and statutory agencies will be crucial to reduce stress and ensure that families are better able to focus on their health and wellbeing during this crisis. We welcome the emerging practice that seeks to do so.

A lack of routine may be hugely disruptive for some children and young people. Parents and carers may require support on a daily basis from professionals across agencies to ensure that for children and young people who require a level of structure to their day this is achieved in a bespoke way appropriate to their developmental needs. In line with Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) principles⁷ agencies should work together to support families. We have been encouraged to hear examples of teachers and other practitioners maintaining telephone or video calls at key times of the day to support and encourage parents and children and young people to meet some mutually agreed daily outcomes.

For other children this will be less of a concern, and the focus may be more on meeting their emotional needs. The Independent Care Review⁸ recognised the important role schools place in allowing children to enjoy stable, nurturing relationships; however, many children and young people are now physically cut off from significant relationships with protective adults and from friends. Supportive relationships are critical for everyone's healthy development but for more vulnerable children and families this could be distressing.

Schools and other agencies should work together to ensure that relationships and connections can be maintained where possible. For example, with particular teachers, support staff and others such as school counsellors who can provide a rich source of comfort and support to children and young people. We would also urge the Committee to provide the technical resources, person-centred support and signposting to appropriate supports that is required to close the digital divide, so that care experienced children and young people can maintain the supportive relationships built up through schools and other community services.

During the current situation, particular groups of parents, children and young people may be further disadvantaged; this may be for a range of reasons but examples might include parents with learning difficulties or those who do not use English as a first language. This may make the current crisis even more bewildering and difficult to navigate and agencies must work hard to ensure these families can access additional help and assistance, in a way which meets their individual needs and circumstances.

Some children and families may not be defined as 'vulnerable' using thresholds which offer a gateway to statutory and third sector support. These children and young people may have previously been identified as having some wellbeing concerns or they may not have come to the attention of any agencies. The

stress and anxiety of the current situation may push these families into crisis but without the safety net provided for those already being assisted.. They may feel a sense of disconnection and isolation with no clear pathway to access help.

What contact and support is being received by children and young people with additional support needs and their parents/carers where they are not attending school/childcare hubs?

There is local variation in the approach to maintaining contact with children and families during this time. Many practitioners have shared that they feel encouraged by the increase in multi-agency working and seeing an implementation of GIRFEC principles into practice.

There have been some concerns raised by practitioners and families that there is a view that school hubs are the only provision available for support to families. It is imperative that local authorities continue to be creative in their approaches to both maintaining support services, and also in communicating the availability of these supports to families in a range of ways.

Some practitioners have shared concerns around how 'vulnerability' is being assessed in their local area and the potential for inconsistencies in applying new national guidelines or emergency legislation. Practitioners have also raised concerns that many families are being contacted by staff that they did not have a relationship with prior to this crisis. Whilst there is a recognition that there is an impact on the workforce and reduced availability of staff at this time, we would encourage the continuation of relationships with care experienced children and families wherever possible and practicable.

Care experienced children and their families have a number of professionals and agencies in their lives and it can often be difficult to build new relationships, and can take a long time to build trust. There are further barriers to building new relationships during this time as physical contact cannot take place and conversations must happen by phone or video call. We welcome many local authorities using a range of options to help staff and families build relationships with each other, if initial contact is required or if the person familiar with the family is not available. Some areas have produced 'conversation starters' or 'talking points' sheets which help to initiate conversations with new people and in some areas, staff are visiting family homes, at a physical distance, to introduce themselves before later discussing more personal or sensitive issues on the phone or via video.

Parents and carers of children with care experience may need additional support to feel engaged and involved in their child's learning at home, or in accessing support services. This requires schools, and education staff, to go beyond the 'traditional' approaches to parental engagement such as sending letters and texts and putting information on social media. Relational and personal connections between staff and parents and carers which is grounded in trust, mutual respect and collaboration will ensure that parents who lack confidence, harbour a mistrust of education due to their own experiences, or who experience issues relating to challenging home circumstances can be appropriately and constructively empowered to work alongside schools to support their children's learning. This relational foundation is more crucial than ever in the current crisis

to ensure that parents and carers feel able to ask for help and support if they need it.

Parents and carers who have children and young people with significant or complex additional support needs they may face a dilemma about using school hubs. The hub may provide a source of support and allow them to work during the current crisis or they may be concerned about infection and therefore choose to keep their child at home. The variability in the way hubs are managed in local authorities means that for some children and young people they need to attend a different school with children they don't know. This can significantly impact on all children but for those with additional support needs this may be even more difficult as small changes can be distressing and parents may struggle to help their child or young person to understand why this has happened.

Some children and young people may have a care package in place, which should continue wherever possible, however, parents and carers may have other children to care for and/or have employment responsibilities.

For parents and carers basic needs such as shopping for food may be extremely stressful especially in situations where they already feel isolated. Providing care to a child with complex additional support needs, without any school provision in the form of hub support, as well as meeting the needs of other children and young people may push parents and carers into crisis. Children and young people may struggle to adapt to being at home with changes to routines, they may miss friends and adults with whom they have strong relationships. Care must be taken to ensure that attempts are made to offer some continuity to these children, young people and families, where possible by a practitioner known to the family and in a safe manner. There should be clear pathways to support and assistance via telephone, texts and in person (when safe to do so) as well as signposting to online support as appropriate. In some areas Educational Psychologists have offered ongoing support to parents by telephone which has provided invaluable support to children and young with additional support needs experiencing anxiety, and other issues, due to the current crisis.

Do you have any insight into how the children and young people are being identified who would best suit attending an education/childcare hubs and are places available?

We draw attention to the varied needs of care experienced children and young people as well as their families and carers, to ensure an approach that works for each individual circumstance. We would also emphasise the importance of choice and participation within education options for children and young people, as well as their families and carers. A recent University of Lancaster study referred to children's participation as 'not a luxury, it is a protective measure' and evidenced how children often make valuable contributions in responding to disasters and risk reduction.⁹ By enabling children to help shape responses to the Coronavirus outbreak we can ensure that rules and services take proper account of their rights and needs.

Children in kinship care

The care of children by relatives or friends, known as kinship care, can often offer children who have experienced adversity the opportunity to be cared for in stable, loving environments by those that they are already familiar with¹⁰. The

legal status of children in these families differs, with some children formally 'looked after' with support from social work services, and others in private family arrangements without this support. Research has highlighted that children in kinship care families are disproportionately living in the poorest households across Scotland. Additionally, support offered to kinship carers can often be very low, even when children are formally looked after less support can be offered than for other types of care¹¹. This is particularly important for some kinship carers who may also be grieving after the death of a family member, and become kinship carers in tragic circumstances.

These deficits in the support and resources available to kinship carers highlight the importance of ensuring access to school hubs for children in kinship care, which can offer vital support and mitigate some strains on resources in kinship families. However, some kinship families who are shielding may feel unable to access the offer of hub provisions, in these cases other support should be offered as appropriate to each family to ensure that the emotional, financial needs of children and their carers are met. As well as providing entitlement to attend hubs, kinship care families have asked Scottish Government to reduce the digital divide, and to provide laptops or tablets and broadband to support home learning.¹²

We are also aware prior to the pandemic there has been an increase in Kinship Care¹³ being identified as an alternative form of care for children who cannot at this time – or in the future – continue to grow in their birth family. There will be much learning from the nation's response to the Coronavirus outbreak. In order for relationships to continue to grow and develop once the initial lockdown restrictions move into a longer term strategy for the public health response there will require to be continued attentive responses.

Many families have significant barriers in accessing the education and childcare hubs. A Family Rights Group survey ¹⁴of 671 kinship carers, who are raising 1029 kinship children and a further 333 birth children, identified that half of kinship carers surveyed are self-isolating because they, the child or, someone in their household have an underlying health condition.

Children in secure care and residential care settings

The Committee should remain aware of the acute needs of children and young people in secure care or residential settings, many of whom will not be able to attend the hubs. We understand that secure care centres are working to maintain the daily education routine of children and young people in their care. This is extremely important given the temporary extensions enabled to arrange children's hearings. Additionally, the maximum time in which a child may be kept in secure accommodation without the authority of the children's hearing or the sheriff has been to an aggregate of 96 hours (whether or not consecutive) in any period of 28 consecutive days.

We would also urge that any children who move from secure care into other types of care during the Coronavirus outbreak are supported to access school hubs or other forms of support to attend to their education and wellbeing. These children will often be especially vulnerable and have disproportionately high levels of complex additional support needs.¹⁵ Furthermore, as these children

may not have relationships with education authorities in the local area they have moved to it is crucial that they are not overlooked.

We would like to highlight for the Committee that some young people are experiencing being more settled, pressure of attending school being removed and less transition within the residential house and the reduction in changes to staff rotas. We are also aware of new and innovative practices being used by residential care staff to support young people to keep in touch with family and friends; these include social distancing visits, walks, social media and video calling and writing letter or sending art work through the post.

Transitions for care experienced young people

Similarly, we would note that any children moving between different homes during the Coronavirus outbreak are supported to access education in school hubs or any other form of support which is appropriate by the local authority that they move into. This will require effective communication between local authorities, health boards and across education authorities as well as schools and social work teams. We would draw attention to the specific needs that looked after children may have when they experience transitions in their lives, which are discussed in question 10. We would also draw attention to the innovative practice emerging during this pandemic, especially the practice described in our response to question 5 in the development of tools when building new relationships with children and families, for whom attachment based and trusting relationships are especially important.

Unaccompanied refugee and asylum seeking children

We note with concern the current housing situation for many refugee and asylum-seeking people who we understand have been placed in hotels during lockdown. We would urge that Scotland lives up to the Independent Care Review's Promise in ensuring that unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children are always treated as 'looked after' children, including being supported to attend hubs where necessary.

Children in foster care

Foster carers are requiring additional support at this time. Foster carers are supporting children's home learning, working alongside families and children to facilitate continued time with family and responding to varied needs of the children that they're caring for. Changes to legislation mean that foster carers may be caring for more children at one time, when support from schools and social workers, which can increase the stability of placements, is less readily available to both foster carers and the children that they care for. Foster carers are managing the rights of children to time with their family in a time of lockdown and social distancing. This can pose a barrier to maintaining family relationships.

Foster care agencies and local authorities are working alongside foster carers and children to understand and capture the new and innovative ways of working that foster carers are using to provide support to children.

Children who are looked after at home

Attention should be drawn to children who are currently looked after in the home on compulsory supervision measures. Adversity is likely to be exacerbated for many families during the coronavirus outbreak. It is imperative that crucial

support continues to be maintained safely and that parents and carers can access the support they need, to avoid impacts on their wellbeing and parenting ability. Parents need to be fully aware of, and feel comfortable in, how to access help in a crisis situation and agencies may need to be flexible and responsive to the needs of parents, children and young people during this crisis.

Accessibility and Eligibility

As child protection services respond to increasing 'high need' situations, consideration must also be given to children who are less visible to the trusted professionals (e.g. teachers) who normally engage with them. We would also urge the Committee to consider the importance of financial and emotional support to families who have experienced loss of income due to the coronavirus crisis.

It is imperative that eligibility criteria for school hubs are flexible and accessible, including for those children who had not previously been considered vulnerable by social services, and that the complex ways that multiple forms of adversity manifest in their lives are considered in any eligibility thresholds for school hubs or other support.

Additionally, we have seen evidence of partnership working that will improve care significantly during and after the pandemic. Partnership working based on the GIRFEC practice model will support the education and wellbeing of children and young people across Scotland. It is imperative that learning from innovative practice and partnership working is captured appropriately, without being an additional burden on service delivery. It is critical that support is non-stigmatising and can build on supportive relationships within local communities. We would urge that consideration be given to the thousands of children and young people who require an alternative approach to the hubs.

Regardless of care setting, many care experienced children can have complex relationships with birth parents, brothers and sisters and close peer networks. We are aware that some local authorities are trialling new ways of supporting children, young people and families to maintain time together, where assessed as appropriate. We know that some local areas are finding it difficult to facilitate how to sustain these relationships, and in some areas, efforts to continue relationships during the crisis have ceased all together. We would urge the Committee, as a priority, to work with Scottish Government to ensure that there is robust and enabling guidance in place which helps practitioners to work alongside children and families to maintain relationships where appropriate, to protect and enhance the wellbeing of children and young people and uphold their rights.

We welcome and encourage local authority practice that has ensured continuity and stability of placement and support arrangements during this current situation. Proactive reassurance regarding medium-longer terms planning for placement support and/or transition planning must continue, so that they can be enacted when lockdown concludes. Information, clarification and interpretive guidance and support on implementation of legislation and guidance around Aftercare and Continuing Care duties and entitlements should be in place.

Care experienced children's situations can be complex and fast changing. The needs of this group of children require robust, holistic and developmentally-informed assessment by skilled and empowered practitioners. We hope we have raised for the Committee, in this section, the nuances, issues and solutions which will need to be attended to by both national and local government when considering definitions around vulnerability and the allocation of supportive resources.

How is their attendance being ensured and what steps take place if they are not in attendance?

Data from Scottish Government¹⁶ demonstrates that an attendance gap exists between 'looked after children' and all other children during normal school operating times. This indicates that looked after children are not as engaged with school as they should be, and further, that parents/carers may be finding it difficult to work alongside schools to support their children's attendance. The disparity in attendance data for this group indicates that children and families with care experience, who attend school less regularly in normal circumstances, may find it even more difficult to attend during the coronavirus outbreak. As previously discussed, support for care experienced children and their families should be needs led and individually planned in a holistic way in line with GIRFEC principles to ensure that the most appropriate and helpful support is available. We would encourage services to think about how they support children's attendance at hubs, if appropriate, rather than ensuring it. Viewing attendance through a support, rather than monitoring, lens helps agencies to respond to need in a child focused way. Hub attendance should be one measure, amongst a fuller plan, for ensuring children and families are supported and non-attendance at a hub could be an indicator that families are facing other underlying or more pervasive issues.

GIRFEC principles and multi-agency working are imperative in normal circumstances for families that are at risk, or are facing vulnerabilities, but this approach is even more crucial during this crisis. Schools cannot, and should not, be solely responsible for supporting families and a coordinated and proportionate response to addressing issues which may be indicated by non-attendance at hubs is required by all agencies and practitioners involved with children. We are aware through our networks that local authorities are monitoring children's engagement with online learning through checking log ins and time spent on online platforms. Whilst this will be a helpful indicator of a child's frequency of engagement with learning tasks, it will be a blunt measure if used in isolation. We would encourage these indicators being used alongside other measures such as supportive calls home, video calls where children are seen and spoken to, where possible, and information from other agencies involved with the family to collect and analyse information on how children and families are coping. Infrequent or non-engagement in online learning tasks should not be addressed in a punitive way by agencies as there is a risk of parents, carers and children becoming further disengaged and vulnerable if they feel fearful of agencies' response to them.

Care should also be taken to ensure that the wellbeing of younger children, who are not able to work with digital technology independently, is assessed holistically and that measures are put in place by local authorities to ensure their wellbeing if they are not attending an allocated hub space.

Whilst there will be a range of measure in place to support families and children's learning during this crisis, of which school hubs will be one, children's rights and wellbeing should be central to decisions made about what universal and targeted support is provided by local authorities.

The Independent Care Review stated that *'Scotland must recognise children's status as human beings with a distinct set of rights. Children are not passive recipients of care. The system must revolve around the rights of the child so their health, education and right to play (for example) are never compromised by contact with the 'care system'. The system must uphold their rights at every turn.'*¹⁷

Innovative education practice in this area can support the Scottish Government's commitment to full incorporation of the UNCRC. For example, in their 2016 Concluding Observations to the UK, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child made recommendations that States *'(f) Inform and consult with children from an early stage on plans for their care and transition and provide sufficient support for care leavers, including for accommodation, employment or further education.'*¹⁸ Providing opportunities for children and young people to have control and agency in the decisions that affect them, allows Scotland to implement a rights-based approach into everyday care¹⁹.

Recent research by the Children's Parliament²⁰ found that fewer than half of the children and young people they surveyed felt like they had a choice in their learning just now. It is essential that care experienced children and young people are given choice and agency in their education, including choice about whether the hub approach best suits their needs. We would encourage the Committee to offer flexible, tailored education opportunities for care experienced children and young people. This is more important than ever during these challenging times.

The Independent Care Review highlighted how *'good universal support also provides the basis for the identification of risk of harm for children. Universal support will look different in every community, and be delivered by a range of organisations and groups, but it must follow the journey of a family.'* We would urge the Committee to consider the stigma of having to identify as vulnerable in order to access support.

Providing support through universal services is non-stigmatising for families and is critical to building relationships with trusted professionals which can ameliorate the impact of poverty.

How is contact in the home, including monitoring wellbeing, continuing in light of social distancing?

We welcome the Coronavirus (COVID-19): safe and ethical social work practice Guidance for Social Workers²¹ provided by the Scottish Government which states "there will still be a need for home visits and direct contact with service users and their families, to provide support, prevent significant harm and/or to fulfil a statutory duty."

Where there are new concerns in the context of 'significant harm' or ongoing concerns about risk, contact in the home is continuing in line with risk

assessment requirements within the guidance. In some situations, only those families deemed at 'highest risk' may have a home visit, with other families being contacted via video conferencing and by telephone. Thus, practitioners may find it challenging to safely undertake a robust assessment of risk and wellbeing in a context where this is based on a snapshot of contact with parents, carers and children and young people on a computer screen. Conversely, some parents are finding video conferencing contact less intimidating and more helpful in building relationships with practitioners.

There has been some evidence of practitioners from a range of agencies offering support, in line with social distancing guidelines. For example, a third sector domestic abuse service worker offering to go for a walk with a child to support a parent in crisis and a deputy head teacher speaking to a child on the telephone to encourage attendance at the school hub. The Scottish Government have issued guidance on the use of PPE for social care staff.

The current crisis may also be removing some barriers to multi-agency working, with agencies working proactively to support the most vulnerable families which is a more positive consequence of the current crisis.

We have received positive feedback from practitioners and young people about increased use of social media platforms and video calling. This has been particularly important for care leavers who often have very limited family networks and can have limited access to statutory or third sector support. There have been examples of new and developing practices where young people have been given smartphones, laptops and had internet connections or data packages arranged. We would encourage greater use of these new practices to ensure that care leavers, and families, are able to participate in and access support available through digital platforms.

Are you aware in your work of an increased demand for support, such as an increase in child protection referrals?

We recognise that statutory services and third sector organisations are going above and beyond during the pandemic, reiterating the vital need for children and families work to continue. It is essential that the new (and in some cases temporary) workforce are suitably trained in child protection and adult protection.

In some areas that there has been a reduction in child protection referrals whereas for other areas this has remained stable. This is an ever changing picture, and there may be variability between local authority areas; recording practices during the current situation may also impact on the reliability of data.

There is also a mixed picture regarding domestic abuse referrals with some areas reporting a significant increase in referrals and others remaining within previous normal parameters. With increasing numbers of calls to domestic abuse national helplines we can perhaps assume that the impact of the crisis is placing women and children at more risk of being further isolated and with reduced choices to ensure their safety. A degree of caution should therefore be applied to any data as in reality this may not portray an accurate picture of the current experience for some women and children.

Some areas highlight that there is increasing concerns about general health, alcohol use, mental health and violence for parents and carers as those who were already struggling are pushed further into crisis. The fragility of mental health of parents cannot be underestimated as the intensity of families being forced together without regular school support may continue for some time. Multi-agency working with adult services will also be a key factor in supporting families, providing reassurance and offering a partnership approach to meeting the needs of the whole family.

Another focus has been on ensuring that parents, carers, children and young people can participate fully in decision making and planning during this time. Again, there are mixed views about the use of video conferencing for this purpose, with some areas struggling to find a technological solution that enables parents, carers, children and families to participate in meetings and discussions. There is some feedback from practitioners that parents, carers, children and families may find participation via video conferencing more beneficial, being able to remain in their own environment and take a break as necessary which may feel less threatening than a face to face meeting with professionals.

With regard to care leavers there is an increase in demand for both practical and emotional support from young people living independently. Financial challenges such as increased costs of food, fuel bills and broadband connections alongside issues which are affecting wellbeing such as social isolation and mental health issues are necessitating more frequent and intensive support from agencies. There is a risk that young people may require support under adult protection legislation if their needs are not appropriately met by services, or if they are unable to access the support they require.

Good quality, robust data is crucial in helping us to understand the issues facing children and families, particularly in the current crisis. We would however encourage the use of a range of data sources to analyse and interpret what data tells us about what children, young people and families need, in order to shape an appropriate response by services. Data must be used in an improvement context and be felt to be an effective tool that practitioners can use to understand the experiences of families that they are working alongside, rather than solely for scrutiny, recording or monitoring purposes. Care must also be taken to understand the stories that lie beneath the statistics; the challenges and opportunities that children and families are experiencing and the provision and services being put in place by organisations to address a range of needs.

What kind of help from local authorities, schools or other service providers would kinship carers, foster carers and parents of vulnerable or looked after children require to support their children and families in this period.

Within this response we have identified a range of supports which children, young people and those who care for them will need both now, and in the transition into the 'new normal'. We have also identified, through our experience of working alongside practitioners, leaders and services and feedback from our stakeholders, a number of themes which we feel are important to raise for the Committee. These themes are not a fully comprehensive representation of the myriad challenges facing children and their families at this time. However, they do represent areas which we feel may disproportionately impact

care experienced children and their families and the Committee may wish to explore these further in this context.

Digital inclusion

A continuing concern is that of digital exclusion. As evidenced by Scottish Government data²², the deep 'digital divide' that exists in Scotland and that can lead to further isolation for families who may be vulnerable. Concerns remain about a lack of technology, access to reliable broadband and significant gaps in knowledge and support. The digital divide exacerbates inequalities and risks fundamentally denying access to services, support and connections so many are relying on during this crisis. We identify three practical needs that require to be addressed and for each person or family who may need support, any one, two or a combination of all three factors may be true.

Firstly, there are concerns around the varying levels of people's digital literacy. For example, older kinship carers or someone who does not have computer technology in their home may not have some very basic skills or experience of using IT. People may not have an email account or be registered online with any of the support services that might be required such as online banking or accessing welfare systems.

Secondly, connection to the internet has been raised as an issue, particularly in rural areas; both in practical and financial terms. It cannot be assumed that everyone has and/or can afford broadband for their home, or data on their mobile devices, or even access to a mobile phone. For example, a care experienced student, away from their college campus, who needs to be able to continue studying and connect with friends while in lockdown.

Thirdly, access to resources is an issue for some families. For example, children who are learning at home, may not have devices, or they may have to share devices with the rest of the family who might need these in order to work or also study.

Many people and organisations have been acutely aware of this issue and are working to address this. The Scottish Government backed funding arrangement to support the No One Left Behind initiative [Connecting Scotland](#) is welcome, but currently this only covers 9,000 people deemed as clinically vulnerable. This criteria would exclude many care experienced children and their families. It is becoming increasingly clear that digital connection is a necessity rather than a luxury, particularly in regards to maintaining relationships, which is more vital than ever in the current situation.

We would be supportive of any efforts to provide free connection and data alongside one-to-one support to help people set up the technology provided. In addition to this, thought should be given to how physical spaces, such as school hubs, could be used to support digital connections when lockdown restrictions are eased to provide supportive services. For example, young people could use digital technology in school hubs to speak to advocacy workers in a more private space.

We would encourage the prioritisation of any actions which would address these concerns. For some vulnerable children, families and their carers, the digital

divide may have already have exacerbated existing inequalities and how they are experienced.

Mental health services

We are aware of the challenges currently facing mental health services in Scotland. The Scottish Government standard states that 90% of children and young people should start treatment within 18 weeks of referral to CAMHS; however, we are aware that more than three out of ten (34.6%) children and young people were not seen within 18 weeks.²³ We have concern over the additional pressures that the coronavirus pandemic will have added and the hidden cost of isolation on children and young people's mental health.

This is compounded for many care experienced children and young people who can be more likely to be affected by digital poverty, as well as often removed from their family or peer networks.

Effective relationships are one of the key protective factors for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, yet we know that these relationships will have been disrupted significantly by the pandemic. We would encourage the use innovative and emerging practices to ensure that young people's mental health and wellbeing needs are identified and appropriately supported.

Transitions

The transition to a 'new normal' when lockdown restrictions are eased will be of crucial importance for care experienced children and their families. Children with care experience may already undergo additional transitions compared to those children who do not have care experience. This includes to and from local authority to independent sector education; between services where children looked after away from home change care placements, or when children move between carers. The coronavirus outbreak has added additional, and often traumatic, transitions to care experienced children's lives.

Children with care experience may be experience instability in their home environment under normal circumstances. This can make routine and predictability even more important elsewhere. The coronavirus outbreak has, for many care experienced children, removed the places, structures and relationships that would provide routine, predictability and for some, safety.

Understanding the importance of attachment can inform the planning and management of transitions for care experienced children. If a child moves from one situation to another, it involves separation from a caregiver, and the likely disruption of an attachment. Changing teachers or schools can disrupt relationships that have particular meanings for children, and sufficient thought must be given to the meaning and importance of relationships when change is planned. If a child experiences abrupt transition between a series of settings with little or no connection between them, their sense of identity, self and relationships can be disrupted.

Consideration should be given to the challenges of transitions for looked after children and the need for specific planning with parents and carers as well as between corporate parents to ensure that relationships are recognised and supported, and that disruption is minimised.

Effective and enabling practice guidance

Services and practitioners will need robust, clear and helpful national and local guidance in order to adapt to new ways of working as the lockdown restrictions are eased. Our experience of supporting organisations to implement new ways of working and sustain change tells us that in order for any new initiative to be successful, organisations need:

- leaders who are able to lead in both a technical and adaptive way;
- good quality data collection and analytical systems;
- staff teams with the correct skills, knowledge, characteristics and qualifications; and
- an enabling and facilitative context to work within.²⁴

Insights from the growing literature on 'implementation' (making change happen) in education reveal that current approaches often limit the potential for progress and positive change. But, at the same time, we are increasingly clear about the systems and approaches which help secure successful change. We would encourage continued focus on the work already being undertaken to identify helpful and meaningful new ways of working that have been necessitated by this crisis. This should begin with the careful selection of well-defined approaches, which show promising evaluative data. These new approaches should be teachable, learnable, doable, and readily assessable. Within education and children's services this means that we must clearly articulate what practitioners are expected to do and say differently in their day-to-day practice, and that this 'ask' must be facilitated by the systems around them, and supported by ongoing high-quality coaching and feedback.

About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

CELCIS Contacts:

Linda O'Neill

Education Lead

linda.o-neill@strath.ac.uk

0141 444 8500

Paul Sullivan

Sector Engagement Lead

paul.sullivan@strath.ac.uk

0141 444 8500

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