

Bridging the digital divide for care experienced young people in Scotland: If not now, when?

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Introduction

'Those who are digitally excluded do not benefit from the great many advantages the technology can bring. They are more limited in their access to public services, to channels for civic and democratic participation, to a wide array of knowledge and information, to opportunities for cultural and social engagement, to the labour market and to opportunities for education and learning. Addressing these disparities is one of the great social challenges of our age.' (Carnegie Trust, 2016)

In Scotland, there has been a lack of national attention to issues of digital exclusion for those in the care system or those moving on from the care system. Whilst the focus of this briefing is how these impact on Scotland's care experienced young people, these issues are not exclusive to Scotland. In 2017, the Children's Commissioner in England published a report called *Growing Up in Digital Care*. The report highlighted that children in the care system in England are more likely than their peers to suffer from digital exclusion, identifying three key areas of deficit: lack of digital access; lack of digital skills and support; and lack of appropriate safeguarding. In this briefing paper we look in detail at these gaps by exploring some of the challenges and solutions to digital exclusion for care experienced young people through the even more critical need created by the COVID-19 crisis.

The briefing begins by providing a brief overview of the current situation for care experienced young people in Scotland, highlighting significant recent developments which provide a context for discussions about the impact of lockdown on care leavers. We also consider the broader literature and commentary on digital exclusion and care leavers, highlighting what was known prior to the onset of lockdown. This information is then

brought together with findings from conversations with local authorities, to provide us with a focus on key challenges and barriers, and the possible short term and long term solutions. The recommendations made in this briefing are a call for the Scottish Government, local authorities and all corporate parents to see rights-based digital inclusion for care experienced young people as their responsibility and a key part of all pathways planning and aftercare support in Scotland.

Leaving Care in Scotland – The pre-COVID picture

Outcomes for care experienced young people remain disproportionately poor across a range of measures compared to the general population (Stein, 2012; Munro 2019). Scotland has the lowest average age of leaving care (Scottish Government, 2013) in the UK along with an already established '[postcode lottery](#)' of provision (McGhee, Lerpiniere, Welch, Graham & Harkin, 2014) across local authority areas in relation to throughcare and aftercare support and services. Care leavers' poor outcomes across a range of areas have been well documented since the 1980s. Compared to their non-care experienced peers, vulnerability to homelessness, lower educational achievement, mental ill health and involvement with the justice system (Biehal, Claydon, Stein and Wade, 1992; Stein and Wade, 2000; National Audit Office, 2015; O' Neill, Harrison, Fowler & Connelly, 2019) are well documented and understood. These outcomes are not inevitable and should not be accepted as the norm (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2015).

Recent changes in policy and legislation underpinned by [Staying Put Scotland Guidance](#) (Scottish Government, 2013) and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 offer the philosophical and legislative drivers to bring about transformational change. The right to remain in positive care placements until aged 21 and the right to receive aftercare support up to age 26 are now legally enshrined. Additional evidence-informed frameworks and initiatives such as the [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#) and the [Improving Care Leavers Housing Pathways](#) offer corporate parents at both a local and national level practical actions and solutions to better support care experienced young people on their journey to adulthood and bring about greater consistency in implementation and practice.

Universally, poverty and financial precariousness continue to have a significant and detrimental impact on the lives and wellbeing of too many care experienced young people (Children's Society, 2016). Recent initiatives in Scotland such as the [Council Tax Exemption for Care Leavers](#) and the introduction of the [Care Experienced Students' Bursary](#) are to be welcomed and have sought to level the playing field for young people who can often lack the safety net of the 'bank of mum and dad', incentivising pathways to Further and Higher Education.

The work of the [Independent Care Review](#), which has an integral, powerful care-experienced voice at its heart, reported to the First Minister in February 2020. It has set ambitious goals to transform the 'care system' and improve the lives of all of Scotland's

care experienced children and young people, with a clear commitment to The Promise for better outcomes for all.

It is clear that Scotland is not short of bold policy intentions and ambitious thinking to address the issues that care experienced young people have faced for many years, but to date, there has been a stubborn implementation gap between policy ambitions and consistent action and improvements in practice (McGhee, 2017).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic – and the public health emergency response to it - has further exacerbated and amplified the precariousness of aspects of many care leavers' lives, and the inconsistencies and variations that exist in relation to support and services. This is evident across the range of local responses that have emerged to support care experienced young people and meet their needs during this time. COVID-19 has further exposed the structural disadvantage and discrimination that many still face, impacting on their rights to services, supports and provisions required to meet their developmental needs into adulthood. This is in relation to both individual circumstances as well as recognising their needs as a broader population to whom the State, as corporate parent, at a local and national level, has specific duties and responsibilities. These duties and responsibilities apply to care experienced young people up to the age of 26:

'Corporate parenting ... refers to an organisation's performance of actions necessary to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of a looked after child or care leaver, and through which physical, emotional, spiritual, social and educational development is promoted, from infancy through to adulthood.'
(Scottish Government, 2015).

Corporate parenting responsibilities include taking actions to promote inclusion, and to help eligible children and young people access opportunities and make use of services. By extension, this must include digital inclusion.

Digital Exclusion and the Digital Divide

There is growing recognition of the significance of a 'digital divide' in UK society, with digital exclusion and digital inequality being seen as key factors contributing to the lack of access to services, social isolation and mental health and wellbeing. A report funded by the Carnegie Trust found:

'that those who do not use the internet are likely to: live less active lifestyles; have poorer mental health; and feel less socially connected to their local area than those who do have internet access – even after all other demographic and socioeconomic factors are taken into account' (White, 2016).

For these reasons 'digital participation' is increasingly seen as way of 'contributing to a number of major public policy goals' (White, 2016). Although bridging the digital divide was initially about improving access to the internet and different types of technology, researchers and practitioners are increasingly talking about a wider agenda to overcome digital inequality which includes 'addressing disparities in skills, usage and engagement' (Humphry, 2019). Digital inequalities are also recognised as 'complex and multifaceted, structured by pre-existing social, economic and geographic inequalities' (Humphry, 2019).

Before the pandemic there had been very limited discussion about the digital needs and rights of those in the care system, or those transitioning out of the care system, in Scotland. One of the few available studies, funded by the Carnegie Trust, found that both staff working in children's services and young people themselves had significant gaps in digital skills and digital literacy. For young people, a lack of access to digital hardware was holding back their development and engagement with these important life skills (Anderson and Swanton 2018). The study also found that workers in residential units lack digital skills and digital literacy and, that these low confidence levels, made them less able to support young people with these skills. Other studies also identified how risk discourses tend to shape practitioner approaches, with a focus on online safety and preventing exploitation dominating the narrative with very little discussion about digital rights and digital inclusion (Hammond and Cooper, 2014; Children's Commissioner for England, 2017).

The internet and digital technology has become integral to all aspects of personal, professional and public life in most societies, and increasingly central to how public, economic and social life functions. It has transformed how we work, communicate, consume, learn, entertain and access information and public services (Sanders, 2020). However, the spread of access and use is uneven and those who are excluded can be limited or unable to participate fully in society (Sanders, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the many inequalities that exist in our society, not least in terms of accessing the digital world that many of us take for granted – and couldn't do without during this crisis. The social isolation lockdown experience is not the same for everyone, however. Social isolation and distancing has been linked to increased anxiety, depression and stress which can have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing. These risk factors are also associated with poverty, which in itself increases the likelihood of social isolation. Social isolation and poverty are well-documented issues (Hughes, 2019; Children's Society, 2016) which disproportionately impact on and affect the mental health and emotional wellbeing of care leavers.

One response, entirely prompted by the COVID-19 crisis, has been the Scottish Government's '[Connecting Scotland](#)' programme. This will offer an internet connection, training and support, and a laptop or tablet to around 9,000 vulnerable people on low incomes, who are considered clinically at high risk and who are not already online. However, whilst this is to be welcomed, by definition, this will not include many care experienced young people.

Digital Inclusion for Scotland's care experienced young people during COVID-19 Pandemic

Since the beginning of lockdown, CELCIS – the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection – has been able to sustain its relationships with all those working to support children, young people, families and care leavers. In offering its support to partners and stakeholders, the Centre has also been able to gather and share insights and information from those working directly with young people and young people themselves. This has included, for example, hosting regular Throughcare and Aftercare 'Community of Practice' sessions for local authority contacts, as well as continuing to convene the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant Alliance group via online video conferencing. These forums and engagements have been critical to gaining a greater understanding of the challenges faced by local authorities and their partners in supporting care experienced young people during the pandemic, and sharing learning and experience. In addition, a short survey (appendix 1) was distributed to all local authorities in Scotland to specifically gain a greater insight into the picture of digital inclusion or exclusion.

Findings

The challenge of digital exclusion during lockdown

Over half of Scotland's local authority areas were able to contribute information for us to build this picture and provide an understanding of the themes and issues involved.

The information confirmed that issues of digital exclusion and disadvantage, which were present for many before lockdown, have only intensified during the COVID-19 crisis. There were three challenges raised by all local authorities:

- Lack of access to hardware including: laptops, tablets and smartphones.
- Lack of consistent reliable access to broadband and Wi-Fi.
- For some young people, gaps in digital literacy or confidence.

Most care experienced young people survive on a limited income and many are living in poverty (Children's Society, 2016). This means that they often lack the funds for laptops or tablets and/or smartphones. Many young people living alone cannot afford or access broadband contracts due to either the direct costs or an inability to commit to contract arrangements due to precariousness of income or accommodation.

'Affording or getting hold of appropriate and affordable devices such as laptops, tablets and smart phones to help with communication with the Benefits Office, support agencies, peers and family has proved to be extremely difficult for young people. Laptops, tables and smart phones are not within their financial reach.'
(Survey Respondent)

In the pre-COVID life, care experienced young people could manage some of these difficulties and to some extent, for example by using publicly available Wi-Fi in town centres, libraries, buses and cafes. They could access computers through libraries, schools, colleges or youth centres. Lockdown, and the closing down of such venues has meant they have often been completely or at least partly cut off from opportunities to connect virtually.

Some young people also do not have the skills and knowledge to make use of online information or to complete detailed complicated forms to access financial support or to apply for places at college, especially without assistance. The lockdown has made such support more difficult to access, the irony being that any previous support that moved online has become inaccessible to those lacking reliable online connections.

The impact of these challenges

The overwhelming view from those providing services and support to care experienced young people is that digital connection is 'absolutely essential and critical' (survey respondent). All the pre-existing risk factors that care experienced young people can face have been amplified and exacerbated during lockdown and the pandemic has further demonstrated that 'care experienced young people are amongst the most isolated and vulnerable' members of society (survey respondent). The importance of digital inclusion for an already marginalised and disadvantaged group cannot be overstated.

'(it's)...absolutely critical to modern living, claiming benefits, applying to colleges or for jobs, paying bills, banking everything is online and massively important. Even more so during the lockdown...'
(Survey Respondent)

Daily living

Digital inclusion is essential for accessing almost everything a care leaver might need: from meeting basic needs for goods and services, to accessing advice and information or engaging with educational and employment opportunities. Information and practical support from everyday services, access to training, accessing DWP and claiming benefits, shopping, banking and paying bills are being increasingly delivered online.

Education

With colleges and universities moving much of their teaching online, at least for the near future, any digital exclusion will risk intensifying the gap in educational engagement, retention and attainment. With online application processes for college and university places being the norm, any digital barriers will exclude and further disadvantage care experienced students and undermine [Widening Access](#) initiatives.

Employment

We already know that care experienced young people can struggle to access employment opportunities. Searching and applying for jobs online requires access to suitable hardware and reliable connection, as well as the digital skills to engage with competence and confidence. With a move to remote working/working from home being the 'norm' for the foreseeable future, many care experienced young people will be further excluded if they continue to face barriers to digital connection.

Mental health and other supports

Many care experienced young people living alone during lockdown have experienced profound isolation and an increased sense of loneliness, impacting on their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Local authorities have also reported increased self-harming and suicidal ideation, with an increased number of suicide attempts among care leavers. Statistics on suicide among this population are not yet available but local authorities have also reported increased concern during this period.

There seems to be a strong connection between the social isolation and loneliness care experienced young people have been experiencing during lockdown and the sharp increase in poor mental health, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. However, further research with care experienced young people would be helpful in understanding the mental health impacts of lockdown and the digital exclusion may have played in the intensification of these difficulties for care leavers. With much of the latest COVID-19 guidance and advice provided online, along with helpful information on mental health supports, any existing or emerging mental health issues can be compounded if access to information is impeded due to lack of digital connection.

Whilst the practical issues of digital exclusion are significant, it is perhaps the impact on mental health and wellbeing that should cause us most concern. This increased sense of isolation has seen some care experienced young people breaking lockdown rules, risking both their own and other's' health. The use of social media and video platforms to keep in contact via Facebook, Snapchat and Zoom for example, as well as streaming services

such as Netflix for entertainment, has been an emotional and psychological lifeline for many.

Rights and participation

The suspension of, or move to virtual platforms for, some formal meetings and processes such as Looked After reviews or Pathways Reviews, and even Children's Hearings, has significant impact on the ability to fully participate. As these processes are vital to planning and supporting successful transitions, then any barrier or impediment to full and meaningful participation is of concern. This raises fundamental rights issues for many care experienced young people during the current pandemic in that they may be unable to fully participate in formal process which may make life-changing legal decisions. These meetings and forums can already be emotionally challenging to navigate and fully participate in. Lacking digital access, both in terms of available tech hardware and connectivity, as well the skills and confidence, creates additional barriers and impinges on young people's rights.

Short-term solutions

A range of positive steps have been taken by individual practitioners, teams and local authorities to address digital exclusion for their care leavers. These actions are not confined to local authority Throughcare and Aftercare teams and services, and other stakeholders and care providers have also been proactive and responsive in ensuring care experienced young people are digitally connected. These have included:

- The purchasing and provision of IT hardware including laptops, tablets and smartphones to care experienced young people who required these;
- Funding for additional data allowances, provision of dongles, and in some cases the installation and funding for home broadband;
- Relaxation of some of the local 'rules' and restrictions around use of particular social media platforms by local authorities, agencies and organisations including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Zoom;
- Much of this has been worker-led in response to the pressing need to connect with young people via mediums that they are more familiar and comfortable with, and driven by a welfare response;
- It is reported that responses and solutions from Corporate IT sections at local authority level have been slow and in some cases non-existent, as opposed to more bespoke, worker-led approaches.

These actions are to be welcomed and have made an immediate and positive difference to the lives and wellbeing of the care experienced young people who have received

support. Much of this has been driven and initiated by local teams, highlighting again evidence of 'ad hoc' and piecemeal responses, part of a 'postcode lottery' of provision. It also raises the issues of how sustainable these short-term funded solutions will be. These first few months of solutions to address needs in lockdown could be short-lived as budgets and services are reconsidered.

Longer-term solutions

'In the long term, IT equipment and digital connection needs to be incorporated into care leavers grants so that no young person is leaving care into their own accommodation without on-line access. This is an absolute 'must', as care leavers are telling us how important this is. It is one of the key things they identify when considering their pathways options about future accommodation.' (survey respondent)

Underpinning any longer-term solution needs to be the acceptance of digital connection for care experienced young people as a basic right, and necessity. There is compelling evidence that this should be integral to pathways planning and aftercare support, viewed through the lens of statutory corporate parenting responsibilities. IT equipment and digital connection needs to be incorporated into care leaver grants so that no young person is leaving care into their own accommodation without online access. This should include:

- Ensuring all accommodation for care experienced young people has reliable and free Wi-Fi/broadband access;
- Providing key hardware such as laptops, tablets or smartphones; and
- Ensuring digital support is freely available to support access, competence and confidence.

Addressing these matters individually within pathways and aftercare support plans, as well as on a broader more strategic level, via corporate parenting planning, should become embedded in everyday practice. In order to do so some key barriers to change, identified by our research, will need to be addressed:

- Variable corporate access to key online platforms to enable digital engagement (e.g. for example video calling via MS Teams or Zoom) within and across local authority areas;
- Gaps in formal digital education for young people;
- Worker competence and confidence to engage with online spaces and tools through training and support;
- Concerns around managing risk and engagement at a distance via social media or other online platforms.

Discussion and Recommendations

Digital access is a key rights and inequality issue which has been amplified during this pandemic. Scottish Government data (Scottish Government, 2020) shows how much this pandemic has exposed the issue of digital exclusion and there is evidence that a deep 'digital divide' exacerbates inequalities and risks fundamentally denying access to services, support and networks so many are relying on during this crisis. Digital access enables connection with support services, crucial socialisation with family and friends, utilities (e.g. banking), and much more – all essential protective factors for physical and mental wellbeing.

This is recognised by the Scottish Government's '[Connecting Scotland](#)' programme. This welcome initiative will offer an internet connection, training and support, and a laptop or tablet to around 9,000 clinically vulnerable people on low incomes, *who are considered clinically at high risk* who are not already online during the response to coronavirus (COVID-19). However, by definition, this will not include many care experienced young people. The pandemic has reinforced the fundamental importance of access to secure, reliable and affordable digital connection, which includes the skills, financial means, confidence and emotional support to participate digitally.

Digital access must no longer be viewed as a luxury, or added extra, but as a fundamental rights issue (CELCIS, 2020).

Since 2015, many local authorities and other corporate parents at both local and national level have endorsed the [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#) and promised to uphold its key principles. These principles include the 'care proofing of policy' and the 'assumption of entitlement' specifically designed to address the structural inequalities and disadvantage that care experienced young people face as a group. We would argue that fully implementing the Covenants promises must include taking all necessary steps to remove barriers and 'level the playing field' with regards to digital inclusion.

The Scottish Government has stated its commitment to incorporate the [UNCRC](#) into Scots Law within this current parliamentary term (2016-2021). The UNCRC is directly relevant to care experienced young people. [Article 20](#) states that they shall be entitled to *special protection and assistance* provided by the State; and [Article 4](#) requires the State to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative or other measures for the implementation of the Convention rights, and, where they cover economic, social and cultural rights, to the *maximum extent of their available resources*.

'Scotland must implement the rights of the child in a way that does not reinforce a focus on policy, process and procedure but supports the ability of children and those around them to connect and develop relationships and cultures that uphold their rights as a matter of course' (Independent Care Review, 2020:26)

To comply fully, this must include addressing the issue of digital inclusion as a basic right.

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, asserts that the web 'must be for everyone', and in the same way that electricity and water are regarded as basic needs that should be available to everyone, digital connection and inclusion should be available as a basic right for all.

'...the web has been the critical unifying force, enabling work, school, social activity and mutual support... being used more than ever for compassion at a distance too' (Berners-Lee, 2020).

The importance of developing and sustaining positive relationships in and beyond care is central to the care and recovery from childhood trauma and to the development of resilience and positive mental health and emotional wellbeing into adulthood. These relationships are particularly critical as young people begin their journeys from care to adulthood and more independent living.

Any tool or medium that enables and supports the development and maintenance of positive social relationships and connections for care experienced young people must be regarded a fundamental necessity

To reiterate, COVID-19 has exposed and amplified the issue of digital connection and digital exclusion for care leavers. The current situation has highlighted the fundamental importance for all of us of having a secure reliable and affordable means of being digitally connected, as well as the skills and confidence to access online supports and services. This situation has highlighted the critical importance of a reliable IT connection as a lifeline for young people, connection with workers, support services, utilities (e.g. banking) and friends and family. Fair and equitable access is fundamental to ensuring social connection and supporting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing. The principle of 'assumption of entitlement' must apply here. Corporate parents and local and national level must work together to ensure that there is a national and strategic solution to ensuring that all care experienced young people have supported and funded access to broadband and internet provision

Recommendations

Ensuring positive connections and relationships are central to Scotland fulfilling [The Promise](#) made to care experienced young people into adulthood (Independent Care Review, 2020). Ensuring digital inclusion must be central to that.

The initial responses from a number of local authorities, corporate parents, other stakeholders and care providers have recognised the fundamental importance of being digitally connected. We also know that however positive these responses are, these are

variable and inconsistent, and there will be many care experienced young people for whom there has been no direct solution.

Many of the solutions to improving digital inclusion have already been identified. What is required is a co-ordinated and concerted activity at both national and local levels to implement these.

We recommend these key actions:

- 1.** Digital connection and inclusion must be viewed through the dual lenses of 'rights and participation' and 'health and wellbeing'.
- 2.** Corporate parents at both national and local levels apply the 'assumption of entitlement' principle to the provision of hardware /connection and ongoing support.
- 3.** IT and digital policies are 'care-proofed' to ensure that they meet the needs of care experienced young people, specifically ensuring available digital platforms that are 'user-friendly' and driven primarily by the engagement needs of care experienced young people. Local authorities and corporate parents avoid the 'one-size-fits-all' corporate solutions and ensure a range of digital platforms and programmes necessary for maximum inclusion.
- 4.** Each statutory Corporate Parenting plan should explicitly detail what strategic action is being taken to ensure that their care experienced young people have the necessary tech hardware, freely available connectivity (broadband/Wi-Fi and data) and the competence and confidence to be fully included.
- 5.** Each individual 'Looked After', Pathways and Aftercare support plan should explicitly reference and address any need and remove any barrier in relation to digital inclusion. This should include the provision of suitable tech hardware, data allowances and connectivity, and ensure young people have the necessary digital competence and confidence to be fully connected.
- 6.** The Connecting Scotland project should be expanded to allocate dedicated tailored funding for care experienced young people experiencing digital exclusion and create a simpler way to access provision and support at local level.

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Digital Connection and Digital Exclusion for Scottish Care Leavers

The COVID-19 Health Pandemic has had a significant and profound impact on the way we are all living, working, studying and socialising. It has exacerbated and amplified the digital divide and highlighted the importance of being digitally literate and digitally connected. We know that care leavers often lack robust and consistent family and social support networks, and can experience disadvantage and poverty into adulthood. As a consequence they may be more likely to experience digital exclusion and disadvantage. In order to help us to explore and better understand some of the key themes and issues which have emerged, we'd be grateful if you could please answer the following questions as fully as possible.

Name:	Job Title:
Local Authority Area:	
1. What challenges have care leavers been facing with digital exclusion or disadvantage?	
2. What impact are these challenges having?	
3. Please give some specific (anonymised) examples:	
4. What are some of the solutions that you have been able to put in place locally?	
5. How have your team or agency/service/authority been able to address some of the challenges?	
6. What has helped ensure your care leavers are suitably supported and connected?	
7. What barriers have you faced in ensuring your care leavers are suitably supported and connected?	
8. How important do you think it is that care leavers are digitally literate and have secure digital connection, access and ongoing support if required?	
9. What are the short-term measures and longer-term solutions that are required to ensure that care leavers have secure digital access?	

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire.

It is our intention to collate this information and draw out key themes and issues which will inform a Briefing paper on the digital connection/exclusion issues facing our care leaver population. Collated information will be anonymised. However we may wish to highlight specific case study examples and will contact you to seek your permission should this be the case. If you have any further information that you wish to share, or have any questions please don't hesitate to get in touch directly.

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SCOTTISH
CARE LEAVERS
COVENANT

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.

For more information

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