

## The digital divide: The impact on the rights of care leavers in Scotland

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### Introduction

Technology and the connections and platforms provided through the internet is increasingly important to all aspects of life, impacting on the way that the economy functions, the way that people communicate and connect, and the way that institutions operate. Access to technology and the internet is now recognised as a fundamental requirement of modern life, those who struggle to access online spaces and use technology face a range of disadvantages.

Young people are often considered to be 'digital natives', with assumptions made that all young people have access to and the skills to utilise a range of digital technologies. However, as with adults, there are significant groups of the population who experience digital exclusion. This digital divide often centres on poverty and social exclusion. The pandemic and the COVID-19 restrictions that have followed brought these issues to the fore for many disadvantaged groups, including those with care experience.

Despite a growing recognition of the impact digital exclusion may be having on care experienced people, and those leaving the care system in particular, our understanding of care leavers' use of digital technology is limited. The wider literature in relation to 'excluded groups' (i.e. excluded from school, employment and training) tends to focus on particular aspects of technology use, rather than everyday experience and does not examine the needs of those with care experience.

In this report we share the findings of a focused piece of research carried out in Scotland by the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) based at the University of Strathclyde and partners at the University of Edinburgh. The aim of the

research was to understand care leavers' experiences of digital exclusion before and during the COVID-19 restrictions in Scotland in 2020. The report begins with a brief discussion of the context and methodology, before reporting on the findings and discussing the implications of these.

## COVID-19 context

In March 2020 a pandemic impacted the globe and governments enforced social restrictions on its citizens to prevent the further spread of the COVID-19 virus. Like others in Scottish society, care leavers were forced to adjust very quickly to a range of restrictions including the closure of schools, colleges, leisure facilities, libraries, restaurants, pubs and most shops. Reliant on a range of social services and often without a community or family 'safety net', care leavers were doubly impacted by changes to services and support during the pandemic, intensifying the disadvantages and discriminations they face (Catch-22, 2020; Coram Voice, 2020; Partnership for Young London, 2020; Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2020).

Outcomes for care experienced young people remain disproportionately poor across a range of measures compared to the general population (Stein, 2012; Munro, 2019). Compared to their non-care experienced peers, vulnerability to homelessness, lower educational achievement, mental ill health and involvement with the justice system are well documented and understood (Biehal et al., 1992; Stein and Wade, 2000; National Audit Office, 2015; O' Neill et al., 2019). These outcomes are not inevitable and should not be accepted as the norm (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2015). Digital exclusion is an additional hardship, and may additionally compound or further the poor outcomes experienced.

## Inform Briefing

This research looks specifically at the experience of care leavers' use of technology during the COVID-19 restrictions and builds on earlier work by McGhee and Roesch-Marsh (2020) which explored this issue by looking at the experience and provision across 17 local authority areas in Scotland by surveying those working within local authority services. This work found that the experience and issues which underpin digital exclusion within the care experienced community had been exacerbated by the pandemic and its subsequent social restrictions. Challenges around ensuring digital access during the pandemic centred on the following: a lack of hardware; a lack of access to stable broadband or Wi-Fi; and for some, gaps in digital confidence and literacy.

## Methodology

This research was carried out during the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions in Scotland,

between September and November 2020, which meant that significant limitations were also placed on the methods which could be used to gather this information. Due to the social restrictions at the time, only online data collection methods were possible. Given the very nature of the subject under study, this raised unavoidable methodological and ethical issues about participation, which are discussed below.

The term COVID-19 restrictions was used, rather than 'lockdown' etc. as Tier-based restrictions continued and varied across Scotland and may be interpreted differently by different people.

Before the research was undertaken the proposed methods were reviewed internally by CELCIS and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection.

The study used mixed methods and included two forms of data collection, both the survey and the focus group questions were piloted before use.

1. Online Survey: The online survey included both open and closed questions, covering demographic information and quantitative data on access and usage of data and devices, and any changes to this use; as well as qualitative questions which explored experiences of technology use during the period of COVID-19 restrictions.
2. Online focus group: The online focus group was facilitated via invitation from the CELCIS participation team to specific groups of young people who have an interest in taking part in research and sharing their views and experiences. The focus group was held on the video-conferencing platform Zoom. The session was recorded and notes taken, including some relevant quotes, rather than transcribed in its entirety. This is due to the practicalities of transcribing an online focus group, and due to the rapid nature of this research. A total of four young people took part, all were female and between the ages of 17-25.

The ongoing COVID-19 restrictions placed limitations on the scope of the research and on the sample of young people included. Participants were those who had some access to digital hardware (most usually a smart phone), at least an intermittent Wi-Fi connection and confidence to take part online. A limitation of the study is that those most impacted by digital exclusion would not have been able to take part in this study. Given our previous work with professionals in local authorities, we felt it was important to get the views of young people on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, even if those we could connect with might not be the most excluded.

Efforts were made to widen access to those without the means to take part digitally. The option to take the survey over the phone was also provided for participants, with the

researcher able to phone the participant back to save phone credit.

The invitation to take part in the online survey and focus group was shared widely with networks and contacts known to CELCIS who have a direct link and working relationship with young people, in the hope that workers could facilitate participation.

## Summary of Responses

Twenty four care leavers filled in the substantial part of the survey which address experiences of digital use and access during COVID-19. However, because not all respondents completed all questions in the survey, particularly the initial demographic information and some questions allowed multiple answers, the totals for each may differ. Only 12 survey respondents noted which Local Authority they were living in, a summary of these responses is collated in Appendix 3.

## Demographics

Respondents were all care leavers from an age range of 15 years old to 29); nine identified as male, while 17 identified as female, and two as other. The majority left care between 16-18 years old (16), while other responders reported leaving care at 19, 22, 23, 24 and 25 years old. The survey gathered responses from across Scotland with nine different authorities being represented. Respondents reported currently residing in their own flat or tenancy (15); a shared tenancy (1); a residential unit or house (1); residing with friends (2) or family (2). Ten identified themselves as being in employment, with four unemployed, nine as students, and two as volunteers.

## Digital Demographics

The majority of respondents (79%) had a smartphone or mobile device; 58% had a computer or laptop; 37% had a tablet or iPad; and 17% had access to a gaming device. This corresponds with 25% having access to only one device; 33% had two devices; 12% had three and 16% had four.

Phone/Smartphone	19
Computer/Laptop	14
Tablet/ iPad	9
Gaming Device	4
Other	0

In the EU, 83% of young people use mobile phones for internet access away from home or work (Eurostat, 2017). The majority of respondents accessed the internet via home Wi-Fi packages (70%) or a data package or contract (58%). In 2016, the Scottish

Household Survey reported that only 1% of young Scots aged 16 to 24 do not use the internet (Scottish Government, 2016).

While this may initially suggest that the care leaver population may have similar rates of access, or relatively high rates of access to devices, this should be caveated by the methodology employed in the study: it is to be expected that those who reply to an online survey will have access and digital capabilities and that secondly this is not a representative sample. This point was made by a focus group participant, who noted that, "assumptions are made that young people just have phones and access to the internet" which is not the reality for all, particularly for those with a care background. This touches on a central notion of the digital inclusion literature which conceptualises young people as digital natives.

## Findings

### 1. Technology and access is important and essential

We wanted to know how care leavers use technology and what they do online. Overall, the findings suggest that having access to internet and devices is very important to care leavers for a range of reasons. In 'normal times' (i.e. pre-COVID and restrictions) is it a necessary way to feel connected and access support and services, this need intensified during COVID-19 restrictions. The sentiment of this focus group member was echoed across the data:

"My phone is the most important thing in my life. It's my world..."  
(focus group participant)

75% of questionnaire respondents felt that access to the internet was extremely important, with no respondents feeling it was not at all important. When asked how important particular online activities were, online banking, emailing and socialising/talking to friends ranked as the most important things to do online (16 respectively). Attending meetings, education and coursework, working from home, and watching TV/Movies also scored highly.

The breadth of activities which survey respondents ranked as important included accessing services, socialising and entertainment, accessing employment and education, and highlights how access and use of the internet effect all aspects of modern life, and in a range of ways:

"I use the internet for every aspect of my life and every interaction"  
(survey respondent)

This was echoed by those who took part in the focus group:

"I use my phone for banking, paying bills, topping up, phoning people to keep in touch, social media. Just my life really"  
(focus group participant)

"I use my phone for everything really" (focus group participant)

Underpinning the everyday importance of access to technology was a more fundamental need to have access to technology to fulfil essential activities which ensure access to basic rights: education, health, social security and food. This requirement had become more acute due to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions.

Responders who were parents of school-aged children, and those in education themselves, required internet and devices to access education when COVID-19 restrictions moved learning online:

"Even school make contact through text" (focus group participant)

"I am a care leaver and a single parent. The biggest barrier was having access to a laptop for my sons school work. I was worried he would fall behind due to lack of resources..." (survey participant)

Overall, participants seemed positive about the move to online learning.

For some, access to health services were impacted, both positively and negatively, by the shift to virtual/online mechanisms due to COVID-19 restrictions.

"Sick lines now have to be sent by picture online" (focus group participant)

"You now have to make NHS appointments using an app so your phone must be able to support the application and not all phones do"  
(focus group participant)

"For the first time I have access to counselling which has been arranged online and we meet virtually which has been a huge help during COVID-19" (survey respondent)

This final example highlights how for some, internet access can open up opportunities to service provision which was previously inaccessible for various reasons.

For others, access to technology was highlighted as essential for accessing basic social

security, welfare payments and food:

“As a single parent with no access to a car and no support network I’ve relied on the internet to do food shopping. The list is endless. Without online access I would have nothing. Even the foodbank that I needed doorstep delivery from was arranged via internet/WhatsApp”  
(survey respondent)

“Twitter helped advise me what grants and support I could access. Universal credit required online access. Childcare applications and bursaries too” (survey respondent)

Many care leavers also spoke about the importance of access to technology in the context of feeling socially connected, particularly during times of unprecedented social restrictions.

“When I was in residential, the room was too small for me to fit a TV in so my laptop was my entertainment and sole piece of tech and connection for everything” (focus group respondent)

“It’s calls too, you need to be able to phone your social worker” (focus group respondent)

“It can be so isolating if you can’t get in touch with anyone you know”  
(survey respondent)

These examples provide multiple, and irrefutable arguments which show a dependence on technological access as a basic utility, through which devices and internet enable them to exercise their fundamental rights. This is an experience of many care leavers:

“Internet is no longer a luxury. It’s imperative to health” (survey respondent)

“It should be a right. It’s a basic need and when everything like universal credit is accessed online people don’t have a choice” (focus group participant)

There was also a further notion that access to technology as a fundamental right was intrinsically linked to citizenship and an essential aspect of modern day society:

“The impact is huge when you can’t access basic services, just the services of being part of society” (focus group participant)

“It’s crucial [access to hardware and internet] otherwise they are not fulfilling their role to help you become a functioning member of society” (survey respondent)

Scotland aspires to be a country where people from every walk of life can fully participate in the life of the nation and in their communities through active citizenship, which Hoskins et al. (2006) has defined as ‘participation in civil society, community and/ or political life.’ As the quotes from these respondents demonstrate, a lack of access to the internet is a huge barrier to active citizenship.

## 2. Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on digital use

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We wanted to know how the COVID-19 restrictions impacted care leavers use of technology, and how technology had impacted their experience of a ‘lockdown’.

67% of survey respondents reported that their technology use had increased during COVID-19 restrictions. This was attributed to social interactions, and work and study moving online during ‘lockdown’:

“I’m using tech to work from home and to access online lectures. I’m also using it to access friends, family, therapy, medical advice” (survey respondent)

Others noted their increase in use as they utilised new ways to relax or feel connected:

“I bought a Ps4 to socialise and relax” (survey respondent)

“...you spend more time watching movies or playing games” (survey respondent)

The lockdown restrictions have meant that a reliance on technology has never been higher, for example, to access home working and education, and digital trends have shifted and accelerated, such as the prevalence of online shopping.

For the majority of care leavers, the change in their use of technology was viewed as positive (42%), 29% were unsure about the impact of their change of technology use, and 8% felt it was negative. Positive aspects of technology during COVID-19 restrictions included services and support appearing more available and accessible, with some suggestion that care leavers may be accessing more of what they enjoy and need via technology:

“Easier to engage with and have access to the things you need/want/enjoy” (survey respondent)

“Everything feels more accessible” (survey respondent)

For others, it was seen to be a way of keeping busy, distracting or occupying their mind in a time which could be testing or traumatic, or simply finding a sense of normality in times and circumstances which were far from ‘normal’.

“It’s just helped to make things feel a little bit more normal during lockdown” (focus group participant)

“It was helpful to make yourself busy, doesn’t matter if you used internet on educational purposes or gaming or anything else” (survey respondent)

Where experiences were negative, technology was experienced as being all consuming and draining attention and energy, as several respondents explained:

“It’s been difficult, constantly using a laptop is a struggle...” (survey respondent)

“I spend more time on my phone than I do outside” (survey respondent)

For some, both accessing technology or having limited or no access to technology could be detrimental to their mental wellbeing.

“...and the thought of not having it or having the internet is really stressful” (focus group participant)

“Social media affects everyone’s mental health” (survey respondent)

Given how many aspects of life now require access to an online environment, it is hardly surprising that care leavers would find limitations to their access stressful and detrimental. The evidence linking digital inclusion to health and wellbeing for all groups is growing, but there remains a need to further understand the challenges faced by particularly excluded groups like care leavers (Watts, 2020).

## [2.1 Online access and access to technology during COVID-19 restrictions](#)

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We wanted to know how access to technology and the internet had been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions or if this had an impact on care leavers experiences of the COVID-19 restrictions.

The majority of care leavers we spoke to had not experienced access problems during COVID-19 restrictions (29%), however, 21% had experienced reduced Wi-Fi connection. Three respondents experienced broken devices, and two were cut off due to failure to pay. For another, connection was poor in the area where they reside which meant their access to internet was intermittent. Access to adequate internet in rural and remote areas is a particular issue in the UK (Lloyds, 2020).

The impact on those who had experienced reduced or limited internet access during the restrictions was overwhelmingly negative, and included: feeling down (43%); feeling anxious (38%); feeling alone (38%) and feeling scared or vulnerable (31%). These findings are similar to those identified by several other studies carried out in England (Partnership for Youth London, 2020; Coram Voice, 2020).

## 2.2 Digital Access via wider opportunities

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Our findings reveal that care leavers' access to devices, software or internet was often facilitated via social or institutional connections. Being part of further education, or involved in activism/networks/organisations who work with care experienced young people facilitated access. Respondents also expressed their awareness that those who were not well connected socially, do not have similar levels of access or support to that access. Their own access was also dependent on continued engagement with these organisations, care leavers being reliant on the willingness of others to recognise digital access as important and necessary:

"The offer [of extra data] only came because I was in education and you shouldn't need to be in education to be offered it" (focus group participant)

"When I worked for [organisation] I was using that laptop but when that ended that had to be returned" (focus group participant)

"Working and not being a student means no access to all the software that colleges and unis let you use and these can be expensive" (focus group participant)

"Getting access to these things through education can be a lottery" (focus group participant)

Often, it was personal connections and networks which supported young adults to access technology required - although this was more frequently explained in terms issue specific use, i.e. completing an application, rather than more general/social use.

“I’ve had to use my flatmate’s laptop to submit applications because I don’t have the software” (focus group participant)

“... All my applications had to be done on someone else’s laptop” (focus group participant)

More generally, the survey found that 7.5% of respondents accessed the internet via friends, family or neighbours, and 12.5% accessed via free sources (such as college, libraries or commercial facilities such as McDonald’s).

### 2.3 Barriers to access

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A number of wider issues, applicable prior to COVID-19 restrictions, were also highlighted as impacting on care leavers’ access to technology. The first related to the cost of devices and internet, and the unstable and disadvantaged financial position care experienced young people often experience. Limited resources, and little financial support meant digital technology was viewed as a luxury, or at the least an addition beyond what was deemed affordable:

“When I was in my flat, I couldn’t afford it [internet access]” (focus group participant)

Accessing financial credit to take out contracts presented a barrier where the financial cost could be met, particularly for younger care leavers due to their age:

“Care leavers can’t get credit for contracts so can really struggle” (focus group participant)

“There are still factors that can prevent you from getting Wi-Fi like age and poor credit score” (survey respondent)

“Before you’re 18 you can’t get a phone or internet contract so 16/17 year old care leavers will be really impacted” (focus group participant)

Having no credit or poor credit is an issue for many carer leavers who don’t have parents or relatives who can counter-sign loans or agreements. It is difficult to develop a positive credit history without this support.

A specific barrier was also raised in relation to facilitating private Wi-Fi within supported accommodation:

“In supported accommodation I wasn’t allowed to get Wi-Fi in my own house as it was seen as a breach of tenancy” (focus group participant)

“Supported accommodation still don’t allow Wi-Fi” (focus group participant)

Underpinning these barriers was the sense that the ability to exercise autonomy in relation to accessing technology was often something taken away from care leavers, for a number of reasons. Accessing technology was dependent on others, in either a practical sense (borrowing devices, or accessing software) or because they needed others such as social workers or through care workers to recognise the need and importance of digital access:

“Corporate parents don’t seem to understand how important [digital] connection is” (focus group participant)

“I’ve been fortunate to live with a flatmate that was happy to put [Wi-Fi] in his name” (focus group participant)

As the importance and value of internet access has been highlighted earlier in the report, both pre and during pandemic conditions, this leaves a rights deficit for care leavers, and raises questions in terms of who is responsible for maintaining and sustaining access and connection.

### 3. Support and Care Leavers recommendations/suggestions

We wanted to know what support care leavers had to get to stay online during COVID-19 restrictions, and what ideas they had for supporting care leavers to get and stay online.

Despite a number of initiatives and efforts by individual councils or workers (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020), the majority of care leavers who responded to our survey had not received additional help or support to stay online during COVID-19 restrictions (67%). For those who had, (three young people) they received a new device, software and data. Support came from a worker, a carer, and a third sector funding body.

Irrespective of their experience of additional help during this time, many felt there was a need for additional support for this population in accessing digital technology during the pandemic restrictions and beyond.

Half of all survey respondents said they would like training, education and learning opportunities to improve their digital knowledge, capabilities and literacy. They also showed a desire for access to devices and data, which was mirrored by the participants in the focus groups:

“Give care leavers a mobile phone when leaving care” (focus group participant)

“Make sure there is access to the internet and an up to date mobile device” (focus group participant)

A range of corporate parents were identified by care leavers as those they would like to receive this support from including: the government, local authorities, education establishments, and third sector organisations.

Training and support to make best use of online opportunities and services has been identified as key issue in bridging the digital divide. The Children’s Commissioner for England (2017) has also identified this as one of the central challenges for those in the care system, because of gaps in education and a lack of training or awareness among carers, children and young people have often missed out on opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence to make the best use of the digital environment.

## Discussion

The findings of this focused study add to a growing evidence base about the digital needs of care leavers in Scotland. In this section we bring together the discussion of our findings under four key headings: digital rights, digital exclusion and poverty, social and digital connections, and corporate parenting.

### 1. Digital Rights

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The experiences captured in this research, show how imperative access to digital technology and the internet is in the 21st century, especially in times of crisis such as the current health pandemic. This research suggests that when care leavers do have adequate access to devices and access to the online world, they feel better able to fully participate in and benefit from education, employment, access professional support and maintain and/or develop supportive social networks, with an overall benefit to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Care leavers in this study reported that having a reliable digital connection made them feeling more supported, connected, and able to thrive in their respective roles.

A number of authors (Peacock, 2019; Reglitz, 2020) and organisations like the United Nations (2011) and the World Economic Forum (2015) had been arguing prior to the pandemic that access to digital technology and safe online spaces should be understood as a basic human right. These arguments have only been strengthened during the recent global crisis, which has highlighted the devastating consequences of digital exclusion for so many disadvantaged groups (Good Things Foundation, 2020).

This rights perspective has two key elements. In order to exercise many basic human rights such as the right to information, freedom of expression and association, people need to be able to access the internet. However, digital environments also need to be

more carefully regulated to ensure our rights to privacy and freedom from exploitation are also protected. Bridging the digital divide and upholding digital rights is about more than providing access to online spaces and digital technology, it also requires that citizens are given the skills and support to navigate and make best use of the digital environment and that governments regulate the online environment to protect their citizens (Third et al., 2019).

The views and experiences of care experienced young people show the necessity of Scottish society recognising access to technology and digital spaces as a fundamental right; without which mental health is compromised, educational and employment opportunities are blocked, and access to vital support and basic essentials remain out of reach. If we want our care experienced young people to thrive and contribute to society we need to ensure all our young people have the tools to participate in society. This includes access to the internet via a reliable device, access to affordable Wi-Fi or data, and the skills, support and guidance to navigate and make the most of online services, support and opportunities.

## 2. Digital exclusion and poverty

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Poverty and disadvantage are intertwined with issues of digital inclusion for care leavers, as these are for other disadvantaged and marginalised groups (The Carnegie Foundation, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and highlighted many of the structural disadvantages and inequalities which care leavers and care experienced young adults already face. It has exacerbated issues of financial hardship and financial precariousness for many care leavers (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2020). Views shared in this research clearly show that poverty and financial insecurity is a barrier to accessing the necessary devices, software, Wi-Fi, repairs or technological support that are necessary to get online and stay connected.

For the most part, digital exclusion is the result of entrenched poverty (Includem, 2020). For this reason, organisations like the Carnegie Trust have been arguing for some time that 'all national and local anti-poverty strategies should include a commitment to improving digital inclusion' (2020: 4). The issue of financial hardship and the impact of poverty on care leavers is well documented (Children's Society, 2016). Leaving home at a much earlier age than the general population, care leavers are much more likely to encounter the effects of debt and poverty, lacking the safety net of the 'bank of mum & dad' which others may take for granted (McGhee, 2017).

Inability to access technology deepens the impact of poverty and disadvantage, as care leavers are unable to access basic provisions, support and services. Our research found there were also examples of where this disadvantage was compounded, i.e. for care leavers who were also parents. These parents shared examples which suggest their children are further disadvantaged by their own circumstances and digital exclusion, and

that this compounds the pressures of parenting, on top of the pressures of parenting during a pandemic.

Not only does digital exclusion have its roots in poverty, it also contributes to the ongoing poverty experienced by care leavers by increasing the risk that they are unable to access education, employment, and the range of services and supports that many rely on to function from day to day.

The provision of equipment and economically accessible and sustainable broadband is to be welcomed through local and national actions. However as others have suggested, addressing the underlying causes of poverty would enable care leavers the dignity to maintain their own social and digital inclusion (Includem, 2020).

### 3. Social and digital connections

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Access to technology was frequently cited as being facilitated via formal and informal social networks and organisational links, including flatmates and friends, voluntary organisations, educational establishments and employers, and at times dependent or beholden to those relationships. Rather than a fundamental right to access, digital inclusion seemed to be dependent on being well connected, having a secure place to live, and being in education or employment. Additionally, and particularly during COVID-19 restrictions, the findings show us that where technology was accessible this enabled care leavers to maintain their social networks and continue to work and study. In this way we can see how care leavers who are better off and more likely to be categorised as 'thriving' in Stein's (2006) typology are most likely to maintain digital connections and benefit from these connections. The most disadvantaged care leavers, who we were not able to speak to in this study, may find their disadvantage further compounded by digital exclusion, making it harder than ever to escape poverty and unemployment or access education, putting them at greater risk of incarceration, hospitalisation and homelessness (Martin et al., 2016).

Reports of corporate ICT policies along with limitations on certain digital engagement platforms within some statutory agencies have hindered professionals' attempts to connect with and support young people (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, 2020). In some parts of Scotland, bureaucratic barriers have added to the technological barriers that exist, compounding challenges for both staff and young people to connect and maintain positive relational support to counter the profound sense of disconnection and exclusion that many have experienced.

Previous research and work by campaigning groups has identified that the stigma of being in care persists for many care leavers, impacting on their sense of self and their treatment by employers and wider society (Bardsley et al., 2018). We found that digital exclusion was also linked to a notion of 'otherness' or being less than - there was a

strong notion of technology and access being the norm, and that a lack of access was conceptualised as being removed from the mainstream and disconnected from wider society. Enabling digital inclusion for care leavers is a key way that we can counter this sense of being on the outside looking in and is important for care leavers sense of self-esteem and their opportunities to connect to the wider care experienced community. Many organisations who work with care experienced young people are doing more and more innovative and exciting work online, providing young people with training and support to become activists, artists, digital innovators and ambassadors (for examples see listed organisations at the end of this document - Appendix 2). Without the tools to get online these opportunities will remain out of reach and this is not acceptable.

The Promise (Independent Care Review, 2020), which aims to transform Scotland's care system, emphasises the fundamental importance of developing and sustaining relationships in and beyond care. This further research reinforces our view that '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' (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020: 11).

#### 4. Corporate parenting

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Being a good parent means recognising and working hard to meet the needs of all our children and young people as they grow and develop and move towards greater independence. This is not possible unless we recognise and respond to the context in which children and young people are growing up. As Livingstone and Blum-Ross have argued in their excellent book, *Parenting for a Digital Future* (2020), this means recognising and understanding the way the digital is changing our ways of living, working and relating. In order to be 'good enough' corporate parents, Scottish local authorities must recognise these responsibilities and support children and young people in the digital present and prepare them for the digital future. When young people leave the formal care system they should be well equipped to navigate the digital world: having access to the necessary technology, ready access to Wi-Fi or data to enable them to get and stay online, and the skills and ongoing support they need to continue to develop their knowledge of and engagement with online spaces and opportunities.

Corporate parents in Scotland have legal duties towards care leavers up to the age of 26 years. However, too often, those with statutory responsibility do not fully understand the extent of their obligations (Independent Care Review, 2020: 93). One of the challenges in implementing corporate parenting strategies and activities is ensuring that the emphasis is firmly fixed on the 'parenting' rather than 'corporate', and that bureaucratic barriers and obstacles do not impede the delivery of person-centred support and care. As The Promise states (Independent Care Review, 2020), 'Scotland must continue to consider how to create greater equity and opportunity for care experienced young adults, ensuring that there is a set of shared aims, values and knowledge for all those with

ongoing parenting responsibilities for young adults'. The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant (SCLC, 2015), which many of Scotland's corporate parents have already publicly endorsed, offers guiding principles on which to design and deliver services and supports. These include the assumption of entitlement, the care proofing of policy, and the importance of sustaining positive relationships for care leavers. These elements must be reflected in digital inclusion policy and provisions for Scotland's care leavers.

## Recommendations

Earlier recommendations for positive actions and solutions have been evidenced and articulated (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020 – Appendix 1) and we would reiterate and reinforce these. In addition, we would aim to highlight and detail the following key areas.

### Policy

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**Roll out digital access for all care leavers by integrating this into the pathway planning and support process in all local authorities.**

These findings reinforce the identified need and solutions behind earlier our recommendations (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020): digital inclusion should be integral to pathways planning and aftercare support, viewed through the lens of statutory corporate parenting responsibilities. This should cover all aspects of 'kit, connection and confidence'. IT equipment and digital connection needs to be incorporated into care leaver grants and independent living costs so that no young person is leaving care into their own accommodation without (sustainable) online access.

On a broader, more strategic, level, actions should be taken within corporate parenting planning, and progress evidenced, to address the systemic and structural variations and inconsistencies that exist in support.

Whilst the Connecting Scotland Strategy (Scottish Government, 2018) calls on a range of bodies, responsibility ultimately lies with the Government to provide collaborative leadership, structural solutions and sustainable funding to ensure maximum inclusion.

### Practice

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**Upskill workers to ensure they can better support young people to develop their digital skills.**

The assumption that all young people are digitally literate can be misplaced and risks excluding vulnerable young adults from digital skills provision (Hesper and Smirnova, 2016). Care experienced young people who have had their schooling disrupted may have missed mainstream opportunities to develop digital knowledge, skills and competence. In

addition, staff and carers themselves may lack the skills and confidence to support young people in developing competence and confidence in using a range of digital mediums (Anderson and Swanton, 2018). Additional opportunities should be made available to support care leavers to acquire the skills, knowledge and confidence, they need to make the most of the online world. Innovative practice examples such as peer-led initiatives and youth work-based informal learning opportunities specifically for care experienced young people may help us to consider how some of the solutions to skills development may be co-produced with young people (Children's Commissioner, 2017).

Our initial study identified worker competence and confidence as both supporting and limiting the use of digital mediums as a means to ensure connecting with care leavers living more independently (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, 2020). Worker-led responses to the pressing need to connect with young people, driven by welfare concerns, has relied on both parties being familiar and comfortable with using particular online platforms. In the ever-changing and rapidly evolving digital world, keeping up to date with new platforms and technologies can be challenging for all. Therefore we would echo the call to ensure that continuing professional learning and development in digital literacy is available to all staff working with looked after young people and care leavers (Anderson and Swanton, 2019).

## Future Research

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### **Undertake research into the experiences and needs of Scottish care leavers which includes attention to digital access and online experiences.**

There is very little available research evidence about the digital experiences, needs and skills of Scottish care leavers. In fact, it has been over 20 years since any large scale research has been undertaken on the needs and experiences of Scottish care leavers (Dixon and Stein, 2005). Given all the policy changes and service developments in that time and the need to be evidence informed in our practice, there is an urgent need for independent, high quality evidence about the Scottish care leaver population. This work should be holistic, considering the innovative methodologies recently employed elsewhere (Briheim-Crookall et al. 2020), but must include attention to the whole world of the care leaver, including their experience of and access to digital environments and opportunities.

## Conclusion

For care leavers to have the best chance of living happy, healthy lives they need access to all the basics that many of us take for granted: a safe and secure place to live, healthy food, meaningful activity, accessible education, health and social care services, and supportive social networks including friends and family (Briheim-Crookall et al., 2020; Roesch-Marsh and Emond, 2020). Given that we live in an increasingly digital world, we must recognise how many of these basic needs are enabled by access to online environments.

Corporate parents and those working directly with care leavers in Scotland need to see digital inclusion as a fundamental right for the young people they work with, supporting them to access this world through the provision of technology, data/ WI-FI, skills training and ongoing support. As with all good throughcare and aftercare work, this must begin early to ensure that by the time young people leave the care of a local authority they have the skills, connectivity and support they need to ensure digital inclusion as they move through their transition years. In the context of delivering on The Promise (Independent Care Review, 2020) to improve care experiences and outcomes for all care leavers, this is essential and urgent work.

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## Appendix 1

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.

(McGhee and Roesch-Marsh, July 2020)

## Appendix 2

A range of organisations are providing innovative support to care leavers to reduce the impact of poverty, get and stay online, and engage in meaningful activities in safe online spaces.

Here are some of the National organisations doing work on these issues who we are aware of, there will be many more local projects. This is not an exhaustive list. You can contact Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh on Twitter @DrARoeschMarsh with further suggestions.

Connecting Scotland - Support to get online -  
<https://connecting.scot/organisations/application-guidance>

Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum – Online groups and projects for care leavers -  
<https://www.staf.scot/>

The Articulate Trust and Hub - Online groups, training and mentorship in the arts and creative industries. <https://www.articulatehub.com/>

Who Cares? Scotland – Online support groups, helpline and support with a range of care leaver needs. <https://www.whocaresscotland.org/>

MRC Pathways – One to one mentoring for care leavers and other online activities.  
<https://mcrpathways.org/>

Shelter Scotland – Advice on benefits, grants and housing helpline.  
[https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get\\_advice/advice\\_topics/paying\\_for\\_a\\_home/benefits\\_and\\_support\\_for\\_care\\_leavers](https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/paying_for_a_home/benefits_and_support_for_care_leavers)

## Appendix 3

Survey responses by Local Authority.

Dundee	1
East Ayrshire	1
East Renfrewshire	2
Edinburgh	2
Falkirk	2
Glasgow	1
Highland	1
Midlothian	1
West Dunbartonshire	1
Total Replies	12

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