

CELCIS submission to the Scottish Parliament's Economy Energy and Fair Work Committee's Inquiry into COVID-19: Economic impact on Young People

Introduction

CELCIS is Scotland's Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde. 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.

We welcome the opportunity to respond here to the Scottish Parliament's Economy and Fair Work Committee consultation on the economic impacts of the pandemic on young people. The needs of care experienced young people will be the focus of our response.

In Scotland, there are over 14,000 looked after children, and over 6000 young people who are eligible for aftercare.ⁱ All of these individuals are care experienced, but their circumstances, needs, strengths and experiences are wide and varied. Despite this, many of these children and young people have experienced significant adversities, which, for a variety of reasons, can impact on their economic outcomes. Whilst each experience is unique, all children and young people with care experience have encountered difficulties in their lives, which have a detrimental impact on their development, their opportunities, and their life chances. It is important that this group of young people have a variety of extra supports that are both readily available and easily accessible to assist them to make a successful transition to independent living and fulfilling employment.

6. How can we ensure that young people have the skills needed to promote economic recovery and to ensure that they gain/remain in employment?

Evidence suggests that young people will be disproportionately impacted by the effects of the pandemic; however, for care experienced young people, the effects will be particularly acute.ⁱⁱ

A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study in 2016 found that being 'looked after' as a child could lead to a sustained impact on a number of socio-economic outcomes including, reduced income, lower socio-economic status, reduced educational attainment, increased homelessness and unemployment.ⁱⁱⁱ These stark differences in outcomes between Scotland's care experienced young people and their peers highlights the need for innovative measures to support them in the world of education and employment as lockdown eases. A number of urgent actions – outlined below - should be taken to ensure these young people do not become 'economically isolated' as a result of the effects of the pandemic.

Education Support

Providing young people with the tools they need – both at school and in Further and Higher Education - is important in considering the development of a skilled young workforce. While many care experienced students go on to Further and Higher Education, particular supports are needed to overcome barriers to doing so. Data shows that, on average, care experienced young people leave school at an earlier age than their peers, with almost three quarters leaving school at (or before) the age of 16, compared to just over one quarter of the total population.^{iv} Looked after young people can have lower average attendance and higher rates of exclusion, which can be attributed to experiences of trauma or other practical factors that interrupt their education.^v These early

leaving rates contribute to lower average levels of qualification than the total population. For example, 40% of looked after school leavers achieved one or more qualifications at SVQF level 5, compared with 84% of the total population. For children looked after at home, who can experience greater adversity than other care experienced children, only 8% achieved a qualification at this level.^{vi}

A consequence of the lower educational attainment of this group is a lower likelihood of these young people being in education, employment or training.^{vii} Lower levels of formal qualifications can leave care experienced young people at a disadvantage in competition for employment opportunities, or entry-level requirements for post-school courses at college or university. COVID-19, and the public health protection response, will undoubtedly disproportionately impact the education journey of care experienced children and young people, therefore we urge consideration of a number of essential supports in order to provide equal access to opportunity.

Young people with care experience should have access to a scaffolding structure of support to meet their individual needs, which is outlined in the CELCIS resource [Looked After and Learning](#). This might include, for example, the tailored support to care experienced people in education or educational applications that is offered by [Hub for Success](#), or support to parents as offered through the [Parents in Partnership](#) model. These supports are crucial to enable them to choose to stay in education, to remain on their chosen courses until completion and to be supported practically, financially and emotionally for the duration of their studying and beyond. The Independent Care Review recognised that parenting does not stop at 18, urging Scotland to create greater equity and opportunity for care experienced young adults.^{viii} To provide the best chance of gaining and remaining in employment then, access to support should remain available to care experienced young people for as long they may want this and should not be time limited or linked to age.

Recent initiatives in Scotland such as the [Council Tax Exemption for Care Leavers](#), the [commitment](#) by Scottish Government to widen access to Scottish Universities and the introduction of the [Care Experienced Student Bursary](#) are to be welcomed. These have sought to level the playing field for young people who can often lack the safety net of the 'bank of mum and dad' and are a crucial step in removing barriers to Further and Higher Education and incentivising pathways towards it. However, more action is required to provide greater equity for care experienced young people.

CELCIS' recent research, commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) '[Being a student with care experience is very daunting](#)' found that 55% of care experienced students had considered leaving their course early. Of these students, 73% reported that not coping financially was amongst their reasons for considering leaving, as further complications arise from the lack of a financial safety net from family. Some of our respondents described being in precarious financial situations, borrowing money from additional sources and dealing with threats when they have been unable to pay a bill.

To ameliorate some of the challenges that care experienced students can face in regards to funding and personal finances we have advocated, both within research^x and in a recent letter to the Scottish Government's Minister for Further and Higher Education, alongside the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, Who Cares? Scotland and the Hub for Success, ^x for the following actions in response to concerns that have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic:

- The care experienced bursary to be continued over summer, rather than only the duration of a course
- Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) and SFC to provide a standard package of financial advice and support to any student in receipt of the care experience bursary

- Colleges and universities to create local directories of support available which offer practical, emotional and financial advice to care experienced students

Data published by the SFC, indicates that the retention of care experienced students in Higher Education has historically been lower than students without care experience.^{xi} We welcome the figures published in 2020 that show that, for the academic year 2017 – 2018, the retention rate was higher for care experienced students than all other students. These promising statistics may indicate that the range of supports available to care experienced students are having a positive impact on students' abilities to remain engaged in their studies. We would however urge caution in removing focus from this area. Historical data shows that between 2013 and 2017 retention rates were lower for care experienced students with a gap of between 6% at the lowest and 7.9% at the highest.^{xii}

The introduction of the care experienced bursary has been a positive step to streamline and clarify processes that had previously been confusing and difficult to navigate, however more can be done to ensure that no unintended disadvantage is caused by interaction between the care experienced bursary and Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits. The current systems can cause negative interactions between the care experienced bursary and DWP payments as well as extend the time that it takes to make an application and receive a decision.^{xiii} Further work is needed in this area to ensure that no care experienced student is unintentionally disadvantaged due to the interaction of these two separate systems.

Further to this, the application process for the care experienced bursary could be strengthened by developing a single, centralised system of funding application and award between the SFC and SAAS to reduce the number of agencies and procedures that care experienced students have to interact with. This would support the alignment of the qualifying criteria for the care experienced bursary in both Further Education & Higher Education and, importantly, support those students transitioning from Further Education and Higher Education in removing the need for them to apply to a different agency for the same bursary. These measures would reduce the risk of financial precariousness and hardship, therefore improving people's chances of progressing and completing qualifications.

We would also urge consideration of childcare provision for care experienced students who are parents, with this support being made available beyond the age of 26.^{xiv}

Implementation of these measures will provide essential financial stability for care experienced students, preventing them from having to engage with a complex benefits system and allow them to focus on securing qualifications.

7. How can employers (including the public sector) be encouraged to employ young people? What levers does the Scottish Government have to incentivise employers to employ young people?

The state has explicit statutory responsibilities to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of looked after children, young people, and care leavers. [Part 9 of the Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#), (and associated [statutory guidance](#)) relates to Corporate Parenting. This requires Scottish Ministers, local authorities and a range of other public sector bodies including Skills Development Scotland and all post-16 Education bodies, to uphold particular responsibilities in all areas of their work. As corporate parents, they must promote the interests of care experienced young people, and enable them to make use of supports and services they provide, working collaboratively wherever necessary. We encourage collaboration and sharing of resources between agencies in order to provide meaningful employment opportunities for care leavers.

An example of this collaboration is the bringing together of local authorities and other corporate parents at both local and national level to endorse the [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#). The Covenant was coproduced by a range of stakeholders including Barnardo's Scotland, CELCIS, Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, IRISS, Life Changes Trust, Quarriers, Staf and Who Cares? Scotland. It is a commitment to care experienced young people to close the gap between policy and practice for care leavers. The principles defined by the Covenant 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. The Covenant recognises that access to the employment market can be more challenging for care leavers and they should be regarded as a high priority group who need additional support to gain and sustain employment.^{xv} This should extend to increasing opportunities for care experienced people to access employment, training, stable housing and support beyond the age of 26.

Family Firm

Corporate parenting responsibilities are complemented by the 'family firm' approach discussed in the Scottish Government framework, [Our Family Firm](#).^{xvi} The framework identifies the employer base as the 'corporate family' from which to build a 'family firm', offering opportunities to all looked after young people and care leavers. The concept is extended through local relationships and networks to external employers across all sectors, including the voluntary and private sectors. As well as offering opportunities themselves, corporate parents have an important influencing role with other employers, encouraging them to offer Modern Apprenticeships to care experienced young people.

The approach aims to encourage employers to offer a broad range of support to help care experienced young people progress to a positive economic destination, and to sustain this. The framework explicitly states that this may be achieved by ring fencing a number of apprenticeships for which looked after young people and care leavers can apply. The Family Firm model has already shown progress in local areas including Highland, East Renfrewshire, North Lanarkshire and Aberdeenshire, among others.^{xvii} We encourage the protection, and, where possible, expansion of the Family Firm approach in Scotland's economic recovery, so that care experienced young people are given fair access to sustainable, supportive employment opportunities.

Supportive Opportunities

We would similarly encourage a focus on existing employability initiatives that have had some previous success in adapting employment environments to meet young people's needs. Providing impetus or incentive for the private sector to provide employment opportunities for care experienced young people can offer important 'social contracts' for businesses to fulfil. Included in these contracts should be opportunities for mentoring and other social supports to nurture the development of care experienced employees. This approach aligns with the response by the Poverty and Inequality Commission to the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery, which recommended attaching conditions to business support such as paying staff the Real Living Wage and developing skills plans including apprenticeships.^{xviii}

Participation of young people

We would urge the Scottish Government to seek the views of young people when considering how to encourage them to take up employment opportunities. We would particularly welcome any opportunities that seek to take in the views of care experienced young people. Champions Boards are one key mechanism of doing so. Champions Boards are forums where care experienced young people and Corporate Parents in a Local Authority work together to create solutions at a local level. Champions Boards come together to engage directly with those who make key decisions about the care system, including on areas such as education and employment. We would

encourage Government to engage with local Champions Boards and other participation groups of young people to seek solutions to some of the existing challenges around employment market inequity.

8. How can procurement be used to incentivise the provision of opportunities to young people?

Whilst there is a primary responsibility on Corporate Parents to adopt a Family Firm approach, there are many opportunities to expand this initiative – or variations thereof – to private sector contracting and procurement.

Employment opportunities, mentoring or modern apprenticeship schemes for care experienced people could be promoted as a component of procurement processes. We welcome initiatives such as [Scotland's Employer Recruitment Incentive](#), for example, that provide financial support to employers who provide stable employment opportunities to groups of young people – including those with care experience – who face barriers to employment.^{xix} We welcome the intention of providing two years of secure employment and recognise the particular importance of this stability for care leavers.

9. What is the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on graduate recruitment?

It is likely that care experienced students may face enormous challenges in securing stable graduate employment due to COVID-19.

Recent research with care experienced students by the charity Become confirmed that some respondents who had been made job offers have seen them postponed or withdrawn as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Many are at increased risk of financial destitution and homelessness as they lose their connections to their educational institutions and support. Only 5% of care experienced students have a job to go to which is likely to go ahead as planned. Over two thirds had no job lined up and no plans to continue with further study.^{xx}

In a recent MCR Pathways survey, only 39% of care experienced school leavers have reported feeling confident about their next steps.^{xxi} Some care experienced young people have reported that they have chosen to defer applications to further and higher education this year due to insecurity in graduate job markets and part time employment whilst studying. The non-completion of study will undoubtedly be disruptive for students and may impact on their ability to secure employment and in some cases may even impact on their eligibility for further funded study places.

10. Do you agree that a Scottish Job Guarantee Scheme is needed? How effective would it be in addressing the potential scarring effect of the crisis on the lives of young people? What practical steps and resources would be needed to implement it?

Yes. A Scottish Job Guarantee scheme that focuses on the employment of young people would be welcomed and we would encourage a specific focus on the needs of young people who are entitled to support through corporate parenting responsibilities.^{xxii}

In 2014, the Scottish Government established clear ambitions to develop employment opportunities for young people in the 'Education working for all: Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Strategy'; however, we note that many of these initiatives have yet to be fully implemented.^{xxiii} We note in the same report that Scotland has not yet made enough progress in relation to addressing existing equalities issues relating to gender, disability and care experienced young people.

The Commission recommended a number of actions that should be taken in order to reduce the inequalities in the current employment market for care leavers.^{xxiv} One of these recommendations was to relax the age restrictions on access to vocational education and training, recognising that care experienced people can have more varied, less linear, transitions through education than their peers.

One of the major challenges laid out in the Commission's report was the need to maximise the contribution of all our young people in the world of work. From as early as primary and nursery education, young people should have a clear picture of all the career choices available to them, to equip them with the skills and knowledge to make more informed choices throughout their school studies and beyond. We would encourage the Scottish Government to refocus efforts on implementation of the ambitions and aims of this strategy.

We would also urge the business sector and corporate parents to recognise the vulnerability of care leavers as young adults, and prioritise and reference them in the design of these assessments and subsequent supports.

11. How do we protect the budget for skills development during an economic crisis where funds are limited? Is Skills Development Scotland's budget sufficient for tackling the potential challenges ahead?

N/a.

12. What will the impact of the economic crisis be on apprenticeships? What can the Scottish Government and its agencies do to ensure that apprenticeships continue to be available to young people?

The Scottish Government's Youth Employment Strategy recognises the opportunity Modern Apprenticeships provide. The strategy also recognises that care leavers experience some of the poorest educational and employment outcomes in society, stating a commitment to increase positive destinations for 'looked after' children by 4 percentage points each year, to reach parity with the overall population by 2021.^{xxv} Urgent action is required in order to achieve that ambition and Modern Apprenticeships should be one option among a full range of opportunities for care experienced people.

Modern Apprenticeships offer young people the chance to 'earn while they learn', and come with the flexibility for employers to set criteria for application which may otherwise have excluded many young people with care experience. One clear benefit to the approach is that it recognises that young people are likely to require mentoring and support as they enter the world of employment, thus providing opportunities that are more accessible than employment offered through traditional routes.^{xxvi}

Practitioners who work in employability and support roles highlight additional benefits of continued support for the success of Modern Apprenticeships, by someone who has an existing positive working relationship with the young person. Other support could be considered for care leavers in finding and maintaining employment, such as coaching or mentoring, built on a foundation of supportive, encouraging relationships.

The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant advocates for greater awareness of the individual needs of care leavers, and the benefits of holistic approaches where young people are provided with sustained employment. We welcome any initiatives that incentivise recruitment of care experienced people and urge that wraparound emotional and personal support is available as part of any employment offer.

13. How can equal opportunities for young people be promoted during the economic crisis?

We would argue that fully implementing the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant's promises must include taking all necessary steps to remove barriers and 'level the playing field' concerning employment, education and digital inclusion.

Providing Equality of Opportunity

Maximising young people's contribution in the world of work firstly requires consideration of child development, so that all children be given equal opportunity to thrive in education, employment and wellbeing. COVID-19, and the public health protection response, has made this more challenging as it has further increased adversity for already vulnerable children and families. Effective financial, practical and emotional support however can help ameliorate existing effects of poverty and inequality.^{xxvii}

Babies, infants and children either as legally 'looked after' at home with parents or living formally or informally with kin, foster carers or adoptive parents, are likely to face additional hardship during COVID-19. Some of these families 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. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises that the State should prioritise the fulfilment of good health and health services, even in the context of political or economic crisis or emergency situations. This requires that children's health and related policies, programmes and services be planned, designed, financed and implemented in a sustainable manner.^{xxviii}

The current lack of holistic support for these families impairs healthy childhood development, therefore it is critical that Scotland lives up to the Independent Care Review Promise in providing a significant upscale in universal family support services.^{xxix} This should extend to all families within the care journey, including adoptive families.

Care Leavers

Given the inequalities in opportunity encountered by care leavers, the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant calls for corporate parents to treat these young people as a 'protected group', with the potential impact of changes to policy measured through Equality Impact Assessments.^{xxx} In addition to this, the SFC have communicated their expectations that all Further Education & Higher Education institutions view care experience as a protected characteristic and that all outcome agreements must detail how they will meet their responsibilities in this regard. We would also encourage consideration of the wraparound financial support that is required to level the playing field, including:

'Where discretion exists in definitions of vulnerability, or in giving priority access, these will be in favour of care leavers. This includes access to employment or training support and provisions. This includes access to bursaries and grants; access to employment or training support and provisions; housing and accommodation options; health services; leisure, cultural and recreational opportunities with access to 'second-chance' opportunities.'^{xxxi}

14. How can we ensure that young people have sufficient means to meet the cost of living during the crisis?

The issue of financial hardship and the impact of poverty on care leavers is well documented. Care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to financial hardship. 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. Living

independently without familial or other support requires higher levels of income, and if many care leavers are faced only with lower paid or precarious work, this in itself can undermine employment stability and growth.^{xxxii}

Housing and Accommodation

Research by Stein in 2010 confirms that being in safe, settled accommodation is associated with increased wellbeing and engagement in education, employment or training. Students who are not able to 'go home' during summer holidays or able to complete internships face the additional pressures of finding temporary or additional employment to ensure they can pay rent and utilities, or be forced to turn down opportunities that would advance their confidence and careers. Therefore, it is imperative that we support care leavers into stable, sustainable housing that will provide a platform for them to succeed.^{xxxiii}

Supporting care experienced young people in their progress through education and into employment is not solely about providing skills. As with all young people, their individual needs must be considered too. We know that care leavers are more likely than other young people to become homeless or experience housing instability.^{xxxiv} There are many complex, often interlinking reasons for this. Like every young person, each person who leaves care in Scotland is unique, with their own skills, strengths, and vulnerabilities. The importance of being in stable, secure, and affordable accommodation and its inter-connected relationship to supporting employment opportunities cannot be overstated.^{xxxv}

For some care leavers, continuing to stay in the places where they live and are cared for after age sixteen, which is defined as 'continuing care' under Part 11 of the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#), (and associated [statutory guidance](#)), has been the default during lockdown. This has provided much-needed stability and security; however, the concern remains that young people may find themselves being transitioned out of this care at a more accelerated pace as we begin to return to 'normal'. Continuing care is the single most important factor in improving outcomes into adulthood for care leavers, and encouraging, enabling and empowering young people to 'stay put' has been a key policy for a number of years now.^{xxxvi}

15. In this time of unprecedented government support for business, how can the Scottish Government ensure its "fair work first" principles are adhered to in relation to youth employment opportunities?

We welcome any measures that allow for employment opportunities that allow young people a stable and supportive environment to grow. It is important that employment opportunities – including Family Firm approaches and Modern Apprenticeships are paid at the Living Wage, and can provide care leavers with adequate financial security and stability; including opportunities that provide secure employment, rather than temporary or 'zero hour' contracts.

We have highlighted the importance of care leavers having access to stable and affordable housing, enabling them to be less reliant on increasingly precarious part-time work or temporary work during holidays and term time. Entry-level work in itself could become more challenging for care leavers of any age to find in the post-COVID-19 employment market. Part-time, sessional and short-term work has itself been significantly reduced during COVID-19, further exacerbating existing levels of disadvantage.

We also support the recommendation made in the [Working Collaboratively for a better Scotland: Strategic Plan](#) to encourage more young people and students to learn a foreign language and to take-up opportunities for international travel, study or work experience.^{xxxvii} These opportunities should be promoted to care leavers as part of corporate parenting opportunities; however, too often, opportunities provided to care leavers are solely within entry or low-level positions.

16. How effective were the Scottish Government’s policies aimed at supporting young people during the previous recession of 2008-9? What lessons can be learned?

N/a.

17. How are the enterprise and skills agencies adapting to the potential impacts on young people, and are they sufficiently resourced to meet these challenges over coming months and years?

N/a.

18. What are other countries and sub-national regions around the world doing to support young people in the labour market?

N/a.

19. Please share any further comments that you have on the impact of COVID-19 on young people

Digital divide

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 could not do without during this crisis.

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. However, the spread of access and use is uneven and those who are excluded can be limited or unable to participate fully in society.^{xxxviii}

Universally, poverty and financial precariousness continue to have a significant and detrimental impact on the lives and wellbeing of too many care leavers. Most care leavers survive on a limited income and many are living in poverty.^{xxxix} This means that they often lack funds for laptops or tablets and smartphones. Many young people living alone cannot afford or access broadband contracts due to either direct costs or inability to commit to contract arrangements due to precariousness of income or accommodation.

In the pre-COVID life, care leavers could manage some of these difficulties 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 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 support. As referenced above, educational outcome indicators show that looked after young people have lower average rates of attendance and higher average rates of exclusion than the wider child population. Whilst these indicators are not predictors of poor educational outcomes, they indicate that care experienced young people’s education can often be interrupted, chaotic or incomplete. This can lead to them missing out or not fully developing critical life skills such as digital literacy, as well as the social and emotional skills and confidence to seek support. Lockdown has compounded these issues by making such support more difficult to access, with the irony being that any previous support that moved to online support became inaccessible to those struggling to get online or who lack reliable online connections.

Underpinning any longer-term economic solution needs to be the acceptance of digital connection for care leavers 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. The overwhelming view from those providing services and support to care leavers is that digital connection is ‘absolutely essential and critical’ (survey respondent).^{xi} 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 leavers has reliable and free Wi-Fi/broadband access;
- Providing key hardware such as laptops, tablets or smartphones; and
- Ensuring digital support, competence and confidence.

All the pre-existing risk factors that care leavers can face have been amplified and exacerbated during lockdown and the pandemic has further demonstrated that ‘care leavers are amongst the most isolated and vulnerable’ members of society (survey respondent). The importance of digital inclusion for an already, at times, 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)^{xii}

It is essential for government to consider these digital needs in relation to the economic impact of COVID-19 on care experienced young people:

- *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 disadvantage care experienced students and undermine [Widening Access](#) initiatives.
- *Employment:* We already know that care leavers can struggle to access employment opportunities. Searching, applying and interviewing 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 leavers will be further excluded if they continue to face barriers to digital connection.^{xlii}

Mental Health

Isolation is having a huge impact on mental health and we would ask the Committee to be aware of the hidden social costs of these changes. We have reports from local teams of an increase in self-harming and hospital admissions due to lack of preventative support and interventions. A recent survey by Children’s Parliament has also highlighted the rise of children feeling scared or anxious as a result of the pandemic and there being a lack of appropriate support around this.^{xxiii}

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.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.

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