

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Discussion with young people and staff from Voices from Care

Thursday 2 July 2020

Background

As part of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, Members were keen to hear directly from those affected. As part of this work, Lynne Neagle MS, Chair of the Committee, met some care experienced young people in a virtual meeting facilitated by Voices from Care.

Some of the key points made by the participants, and feedback from other care experienced children and young people they were representing, is set out below. The discussion focussed on three key themes arising from the pandemic:

- Positive experiences
- Frustrations
- Moving forward – how can support be improved?

Positive experiences

Some examples of more positive experiences during the 'lockdown' included:

- Having more time to do things, like university assignments and exercise.
- Having more time to do hobbies, like cooking and writing poetry.
- Realising that 'I can rely on myself'.
- Having more time to connect with other people on-line.
- Having more time to get household bills back on track.



- Being able to build stronger relationships with social workers / personal advisors – ‘my social worker calls once or twice a week and texts since lockdown’.

Staff reported that placements had ‘been strong in foster care’ and only in a minority of cases had placements broken down, reportedly due to the pressures of children being in the house all the time. Staff reported that, in their view, this reflected well on the motivations of foster carers given that most placements had remained successful despite significant pressures.

Participants said there had been many positive experiences among the care experienced community of connecting on-line and getting advice and support. However, a lack of access to good connectivity (e.g. through a lack of mobile data, hardware, or Wi-Fi problems) and—in some cases—poor digital skills, were reported as big problems.

Frustrations

Some examples of frustrations experienced during the ‘lockdown’ included:

- A young person in Higher Education reporting a lack of support from lecturers and being unable to find out when they are available to meet virtually.
- Tensions due to some young people not understanding ‘lockdown rules’ and wanting to visit family and friends. It was felt this had the potential to reinforce the existing views of some care experienced children that ‘they are always being told what to do’. There was a feeling that more information aimed at young people would be helpful so that care experienced people could see that the rules applied to everyone and not just to those in care.
- Young care leavers in rural communities struggling from isolation and not being able to easily get to food shops. However, it was reported that some local authorities had been good at delivering food parcels.
- Some care leavers experiencing challenges due to having to support older relatives who were self-isolating.

- Problems accessing mental health services was a big theme, especially for the ‘missing middle’¹ group of young care experienced children. Staff reported that ‘not all situations work digitally’ in terms of the provision of mental health services and that, when young people need help, it is often after 5pm. They also reported concerns about young people reportedly being sectioned as there were no placements available. It was felt that an ‘active offer’ of mental health support would help address a wide range of mental health concerns.

Moving forward: how can support be improved?

Some suggestions and thoughts about how support could be improved included:

- Using more technology to maintain contact with siblings, family and social workers. It was felt this would also be very beneficial for children and young people placed ‘out of county’.
- Adopting more ‘reasonable’ rules around the use of social media in residential and foster care to address a range of concerns raised by children and young people. These included reports of phones being removed from children and young people at 6.30pm every night, Wi-Fi being turned off in residential care, and concerns that some carers look through messages. All of this was seen as preventing children and young people maintaining good and appropriate contact with family and friends.
- Improving involvement of children and young people in their ‘children looked after reviews’ with consistent advocacy support.
- Focusing more on the needs of care experienced children in the education system and better guidance for schools.

¹ “The missing middle” is a term often used to describe those children and young people who need mental health support, but who may not be poorly enough to need—or meet criteria for—help from specialist services.
