

# Leaving Care During Covid-19

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"I already had my own struggles. So then, when the whole world is struggling, it doesn't really help"



QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST

VOYPIC VOICE OF  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN CARE

## WHY WE DID THE STUDY

Since March 2020, the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has significantly impacted on the daily life of people across the UK and Ireland. In response to the pandemic, the Department of Health introduced new children's social care regulations which changed how statutory visits and review meetings took place, and extended the time period for the review of a care leaver's pathway plan. Guidance was also issued to care providers to ensure the safety and wellbeing of young people and staff through compliance with public health advice. This included an emphasis on: keeping young people informed, if not involved, in decisions about them; the suspension or at least minimising of face-to-face meetings; use of alternative forms of communication; and maximising the flexibility within existing provision and professional practice. The importance of supporting education and providing additional therapeutic and mental health services support, as appropriate, was also highlighted.

Arrangements were put in place to monitor the outcomes of these changes, however, Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) was concerned about the wider impact of the virus and the associated restrictive measures on the lives of care leavers. VOYPIC wanted to hear the views of young people during the pandemic and how they experienced the resulting changes to services. As a result, VOYPIC decided to undertake this study with Queen's University so that the views of care leavers can inform and shape future planning and service delivery during the pandemic.

## WHAT WE DID

In the absence of any research on the experiences of care leavers during the pandemic in Northern Ireland, this was a short-term study focused on listening to the experiences of youth leaving care in Northern Ireland and seeking their views on how best to meet their support needs. The study was approved by QUB before it started. Overall, we wanted to find out about:



- 1. Care leavers' experiences of living under the restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19;**
- 2. How care leavers have managed during the pandemic and the impact it has had on their wellbeing and support needs;**
- 3. Changes to services for care leavers during this time and how they have been delivered;**
- 4. Different approaches to supporting care leavers during the pandemic and any messages for the future in terms of best practice and areas for improvement.**

We recruited 24 care leavers via VOYPIC, who invited them to participate and put them in touch with the researcher. As this was a small study exploring the views of 24 care leavers who were in contact with VOYPIC, it does not claim to represent

the experiences of all of the youth leaving care in Northern Ireland as other young people not in touch with any service providers may have very different experiences. However, we were able to include young people from a range of backgrounds.

The young people were aged between 18 and 25 and lived in different parts of Northern Ireland. Most had left care before the pandemic (13) whilst 4 had left care during the pandemic and 7 self-identified as still being in care, usually because they were still living with carers. Many were still in contact with their social worker and/or personal advisor as well as a range of other professionals.

After giving their consent, these young people took part in interviews via Whatsapp or telephone. Interview questions focused on: experiences of life during the Covid-19 pandemic at various stages of Government restrictions; experiences of formal and informal support; hopes and fears for the future; and key messages for service providers on how best to support care leavers during the pandemic. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The initial findings were then shared with professionals working with care leavers in each of the Trusts in Northern Ireland at a round table meeting to discuss the key messages and implications for future policy and practice.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Five major themes emerged from the interviews: disruptions as a result of Covid-19; continuities; individual responses to manage and adapt; mental health and wellbeing and; effective practices for supporting care leavers.



## Disruptions

Young people experienced a range of disruptions to the lives including: disrupted family relationships, reduced social contacts, changes in education or employment, cancelled plans for international travel, and delayed treatment or services. Young people also felt that, following the onset of Covid-19, transitions were disrupted and it took some time for professionals to make decisions which were then often made abruptly and excluded the young person from the decision making process:

**"It was like three weeks before my 18th and I didn't have a clue where I was going, and I was actually questioning whether they were going to keep me [there]... because no social workers were telling me where I was going... [finally] I was told where I was going, and that was it. I didn't even get really a say or nothing about it like."**

(Elena, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Some young people experienced disruptions in order to keep carers or relatives safe. For example, one young person who worked in a health care setting and had been living with grandparents was asked her to move out in order to keep them safe. The decision of the family members was communicated to the young person but they felt there were not consulted or given time to prepare for this move:

**"You know, the typical black bag, and the same thing happened again... even though I'd been there for years."**

(Una, 23, left care before Covid-19).

Many young people also discussed their concern for others, and in complying with guidance, had taken their own decision to change the way they made contact with family members, despite its personal impact. For example, they either stopped, reduced or went online to maintain contact. Disruptions also affected young people's peer and informal social networks. In particular, the closure of schools, sports teams and fitness centres, combined with restrictions on home visits appeared to at least temporarily sever interpersonal contact.

**"And just being in my room or being in this house all the time was just, it was very difficult, for everyone and not just me, but like if we're to talk about me in this case it was just, it was very difficult, because I couldn't see my friends, I couldn't see my birth family or anything like that. It was very difficult, you know?"**

(Ewan, 18, still in care).

However, disrupted social relations did not always mean isolation from others. For several young people, the restrictions on movement required those living in the same house to spend more time at home together- something that created its own challenges and opportunities.

**"But obviously being stuck in the same house with a lot of people for a while, and especially considering we are very, very different in terms of our religious and political views makes for a very tense situation."**

(Brian, 22, still in care).

But as in many cases, these disruptions also created new opportunities for families to spend time together, to try new activities and heal fractious relationships.

**"Like we were a lot more open as a family... in the first month, we were going on walks every day, having long chats, like debates and political views".**

(Michelle, 18, left care before Covid-19).

It was not only interpersonal relationships that had new opportunities for growth during this time. For several young people, the onset of Covid-19 provided new perspectives and time to reflect on their lives:

**"I'm glad lockdown happened because... I found myself and I started to love myself, and started to realise like you don't need anyone to love you... when you find yourself it'll be the happiest day of your life, because that's the way I am now."**

(Lorraine, 22, left care before Covid-19).

In fact, some young people appeared to prefer the 'order' that restrictions ushered in.

**"...the personal space, that nobody's coming up, you know, and nudging into you or... nobody's in your face... and nowhere's jam packed, you know, like the bus, the station."**

(Gary, 23, still in care).

Many of the young people experienced important personal milestones such as transitioning into higher education, employment and/or independent living and significant birthdays (for example, turning 18).



Usual celebrations of these milestones with friends or family were disrupted. For several young people who did not have informal peer or family networks, the role of their social worker and personal advisor in recognising and supporting these milestones was critical. One young person described the very practical effect on the transition into higher education:

**"I found it really difficult... I could've done with a little bit of help from my social worker but obviously he couldn't because of the lockdown restrictions, but I had to do student finance completely on my own. And I got... the wrong amount of money back... I should've been getting a wee bit more. So, I felt that I could've got a bit of help with the student finance. My PA was supposed to help me with it at the time, but my PA... we obviously didn't get along and in my opinion... I found him quite lazy."**

(Michelle, 18, left care before Covid-19).

For those who spent the final months in care under the Covid-19 restrictions, the end of their time in care had been clouded by the impact of the challenges of life in lockdown, as one young person who had recently left residential care explained:

**"To be honest I look back on it and I'm like it was the shittiest, I've been in care... I've been in all different homes... and looking back on it because of Covid-19 it really affected my last kind of memories in the home, because like I look back and I'll be like 'f\*\*\*k I was under lockdown and the staff didn't do shit with me in my last few months in care'. Whereas if lockdown hadn't have happened I would've been able to do endings with my keyworkers and go out for dinner and do all that there."**

(Elena, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Moving on from care into independent living or shared living with new people was also anxiety provoking, particularly given the guidance to stay at home and concerns that others may not comply with public health guidance:

**"I kind of felt pressured to like move into this place and actually with Covid it was actually making me a bit more anxious, because I'm actually sharing a building with [several] other people and people are coming in and out."**

(Bronagh, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Young people who moved into new living arrangements and who often faced new and complex challenges also felt they had reduced access to support which exacerbated issues:

**"You're moving into a world by yourself. Say you're going into like supported accommodation or something, you know, a lot of the time you'll have somebody coming out to visit you, but with a pandemic that can't happen. And if you're in lockdown in your new house that could be really lonely."**

(Una, 23, left care before Covid-19).

## Continuities

Interestingly, despite the many disruptions to their lives, young people also noted that there was also a great deal of continuity with some suggesting that little had changed. In some of these cases, young people felt that they were socially isolated before the pandemic so not much had changed:

**"So, my life wasn't the best before lockdown came about anyway because I was actually like more living in my bedroom and wasn't doing much."**

(Bronagh, 18, left care during Covid-19).

**"I'm very introverted naturally... honestly I didn't really have to change a lot of my schedule".**

(Rachel, 18, still in care).

Despite the obvious disruptions to some social relations, technology provided various ways in which connections could be maintained:

**"I wasn't able to go and see my mum and all, and I wouldn't have been able to get in touch with my friends and stuff, but I was able to still keep those connections obviously."**

(Brian, 22, still in care).

For those in education, ongoing study or exams were a source of continuity but also presented additional pressures during a situation that was completely unprecedented.

**"I had so many coursework pieces to hand in... my dissertation was running in the background, and then I had my exams... [but] if lockdown wasn't declared and I was still living everyday life I don't think I would've done as well"**

(Maxine, 23, left care before Covid-19).

Despite the potential benefits, the 'carry on regardless' approach added additional pressures, particularly when the resources and supports that students would ordinarily expect, were unavailable.

**"And I still had to try and do my uni course online, which was pretty stressful with the kids in the house and all that... it was quite difficult".**

(Brenda, 20, still in care).

**"I had to finish my degree...So I kind of had to push it... even though it was a lot emotionally... Even like our library and stuff was closed, so we couldn't access the books".**

(Una, 23, left care before Covid-19).

## Individual responses

Young people described a range of individual responses to the context of the pandemic relating to adherence to restrictions and coping mechanisms. Young people understood the restrictions that were put in place and, whilst a minority indicated that their lives continued as normal regardless of restrictions, most were compliant with restrictions to protect themselves and others.

**"I didn't leave the house. Well I went out and did my shopping once a week and, you know, I didn't see my mummy."**

(Maxine, 23, left care before Covid-19).

And even as restrictions eased, young people appeared to generally understand changing expectations and continue to comply with them.

**"Well in terms of home life I still adhere to not going out. The only thing I have done since would be just social bubble, so like I'll go and see... family."**

(Brian, 22, still in care).

There was also indignation towards others who young people believed disregards the guidance and as a result, placed others at risk.

**"But it was worse for me because my ex-partner was not listening to the rules...He was not doing what he was told to do... Then he started bringing his friends to the house in groups and groups and it was really stressing me out, and it was causing so much strife."**

(Lorraine, 22, left care before Covid-19).

In the short term too, a significant period of time during lockdown was spent alone. Most young people described different strategies for distracting themselves from boredom or anxiety including playing games, engaging in arts or crafts, spending time with family or cooking.

**"I picked up a bad habit of staying up all night playing the PlayStation and then sleeping all day... but it was the only way I seen lockdown getting over quicker..."**

(Phil, 18, left care before Covid-19).

**"Like it made me kind of focus on like more myself and giving myself time to do the things that I kind of wanted to do... I was able to like pick up my arts and drawing again and spend time as a family, like... helping with the cooking."**

(Ellen, 20, left care before Covid-19).

Some young people had developed creative coping strategies and self-care tasks, including exercising, writing down their thoughts or making lists to counteract negative thoughts and feelings:

**"You know, depression's a big thing, it can creep in at any point, so you've got to like keep a space in between like where you sleep and where you have a clear like work and rest area. I wrote down a hundred things I'm grateful for, and I felt like that really helped".**

(Rachel, 18, still in care).

For a minority, less focus was placed on tools or strategies, however, young people felt they had a sense of resilience from overcoming previous transitions or traumatic events in their lives and understood that difficult experiences will end at some point:

**"So, I can't say I coped with it, but I just say, I can say it passed."**

(Alex, 18, left care during Covid-19).

**"Care experienced children... we're that used to unfamiliar circumstances and things changing that quickly that we can quickly adapt to whatever the new situation is. And that obviously shouldn't be the way it is, but that's just how it is I guess".**

(Rhianna, 20, left care before Covid-19).



## Mental health and wellbeing

Many young people noted the negative impact of Covid-19 on their mental health leading to increased anxieties, low mood and emotional breakdowns. Even routine tasks and experiences became difficult and emotions became overwhelming.

**"My mental health like, I, the amount of times I would've found myself crying like or cracking up... I literally just was at wits end. Like I just was, I found myself getting really frustrated easily, like, do you know like just little things, like if her printer didn't work I was effing and damning at it, even though it can't f and damn back at me like"**

(Phoebe, 19, still in care).

For those with pre-existing mental health conditions, the effects were even more acute as the impact of Covid-19 exacerbated already complex issues and elevated symptoms and psychological distress:

**"It just made it a lot worse... I already had my own struggles. So then when the whole world is struggling (laughs) it doesn't really help".**

(Bronagh, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Emotional wellbeing appeared to be moderated in some ways by the presence or absence of effective social or formal supports, particularly as time progressed.

**"So obviously like lockdown wasn't the best for me like because I have no family and I live in a one bedroomed flat. The best support I have is friends, but obviously I couldn't see them for a very long time, so I did feel quite alone... and it was just sort of me and the walls and there wasn't much else to do... I felt like there was no way to sort of escape. It was always just the white walls around me".**

(Phil, 18, left care before Covid-19).

**"Because of the period of time. So, I got into a very dark place and I was like, I could've done with more support".**

(Michelle, 18, left care before Covid-19).

Loneliness and isolation were common experiences and many young people emphasised that having someone to talk would have helped:

**"That makes me feel terrible, like I couldn't get support from someone. You feel like lonely, and no one is helping you, you know... I feel like I am the only one living in the world... like life [is] terrible, struggling".**

(Alex, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Without access to effective coping strategies, some young people struggled to maintain positive mental health and recognised themselves that there was a deterioration in their general wellbeing.

**"Even my mental health. I noticed that it deteriorated as well because my way of talking to people would be going out for a drive, sitting down, listening to music and then talking, do you know what I mean?"**

(Elena, 18, left care during Covid-19).

## Access to professional support

Young people's experiences of professional support throughout the lockdown and into the second surge was mixed. Some young people felt content with the support they received, given the circumstances. Some even suggesting contact increased over the period several indicating that social workers were going beyond what young people expected them to do for them.

**"I had more contact with them than I ever did. I would've had contact with the social workers... they would ring to see how I'm doing. And then I would have contact with the therapist... she would've contacted a couple of times a week... and then employability... was ringing as well. So, I had a lot of support through it."**

(Gary, 23, still in care).

On the whole, young people understood that there were limitations around support and that it would take time to adjust, but they appreciated having someone on the end of the phone or computer to connect with.

**"Like it was just having somebody to talk things through with, do you know? It was good. That was the thing that really helped the most."**

(Phoebe, 19, still in care).

- Of course, there were limitations to virtual contact and even when young people understood the reasons for these restricted forms of communication, those who were most isolated were still greatly affected:

**"So it was a very, very, very difficult time for me, because social services couldn't come near me... I had supports over the phone and stuff, but at the time it was very difficult because they didn't know what they were allowed to do".**

(Bronagh, 18, left care during Covid-19).

As time progressed, it was evident that the type of contact professionals offered to some young people began to evolve, moving from distanced and virtual communication to facilitate in-person contact primarily via outdoor walks.

**"I enjoyed seeing my social worker pull up in his car, and we would just have a good chat and stuff. Like I wrote down a couple of things that helped and a couple of things that didn't help, if you'd like to hear them?"**

(Phil, 18, left care before Covid-19).

However, this type of support was limited for most who continued to be offered contact through text, phone or online platforms. Young people did not want these distanced or virtual contacts to become the norm in the long-term. Some young people also did not have easy access to technology, data or the internet:

**"Well it's actually quite hard for me because I don't have WiFi and stuff so I can't always get onto the phone calls."**

(Julie, 18, left care before Covid-19).

**"See like Zoom calls and stuff like that there, I just hated it... it was draining my data."**

(Jennifer, 22, left care before Covid-19).

**"If there was a possibility of someone could actually physically be there for me it would've been a lot more helpful. Whether or not they were in the same room as me or not, or even if they were just there as a person that I could physically see as a comfort, they didn't have to come and touch me or come near me... I still feel like there should could've been someone who could've physically been there for me and it would've helped me a lot."**

(Bronagh, 18, left care during Covid-19).

Despite most young people saying that they understood support was available, should they have needed it, others indicated that they had sought formal supports and had a poor response:

**"And that was the last time I heard from [my social worker], in May and I've rang him seven times since and I've texted him five times since, and he hasn't texted or contacted me back."**

(Maxine, 23, left care before Covid-19).

**"They should be putting slots available...I'm going to be ringing you on Tuesday at two o'clock', so that I know that they're going to ring me, instead of me trying to get the hold of them and not one of them f\*\*\*ing answering their phones."**

(Elena, 18, left care during Covid-19).

One young person described his feelings of disappointment and hurt related to the lack of contact from their social worker. He lived alone and was feeling isolated since his usual school and sporting activities had stopped. He felt let down when his social worker cancelled or failed to attend several meetings they had arranged. He felt that their relationship had been damaged and, as a result, he had no one to share his news with on the day he received his exam results:

**"So my results are coming out tomorrow but I won't even be able to tell him, when he's sort of one of the only people in my life who I can tell, and it would've been something that I would've been looking forward to tell him... but it's another big thing that's affected. I feel like the relationship is going to go down because of that. Like I'm just going to be so raging that I can't pick up the phone, and the only sort of adult I have in my life, I can't say to him 'Here look I got this. Are you proud?'"**

(Phil, 18, left care before Covid-19).

Young people also reported a need for more practical and professional support including more food parcels, increased access to advice and support for mental health needs. One young person reported contacting a mental health professional on several occasions to seek advice without receiving a response. Another young person who had begun a therapeutic programme before the onset of Covid-19 felt that the good progress they had made was greatly reduced when the service had temporarily closed during lockdown:

**"I had started a mental health course... and I was finally like getting more confident, and then it actually hit me really hard, because like I was doing so well and now I feel like my life's on pause again."**

(Michelle, 18, left care before Covid-19)

Several young people who were able to access medical advice, reported that the nature of support received was inappropriate:

**"But a few weeks from the lockdown happened my mental health started really deteriorating... I was phoning them every other day crying my eyes out uncontrollably because I needed help... And all my doctors were doing was prescribing me more tablets... nothing was put in place, so... I was left basically in the lurch."**

(Rhianna, 20, left care before Covid-19).

**"And I was like 'I'm really going downhill, and I need some help'... And I told them this for three months, and then... I had a breakdown".**

(Una, 23, left care before Covid-19).

## MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on these findings, there are ten key messages for future policy and practice to inform the development of effective supports for care leavers during the ongoing pandemic.

### 1. Keep in touch consistently and maintain professional relationships

As Covid-19 continues to impact on the lives of care leavers, keeping in touch with these young people consistently should be a priority. This could be a regular, scheduled phone call or virtual meeting but should also include socially distant in-person contacts when restrictions are eased. Young people, therefore, emphasised the importance of consistency and professionals fulfilling commitments to meet or keep in touch in order to maintain effective relationships.

### 2. Strengthen informal and formal systems of support around the young person

Professionals need to maintain regular communication with care leavers to ensure they are adequately supported and to respond more effectively to their evolving needs as the impact of the pandemic progresses. Efforts should also be made to connect young people to informal supports through peer networks, family members and community-based services in their area. Strengthening these informal supports and helping young people to establish innovative ways to keep in touch with friends and family during the pandemic can help to address loneliness, social isolation and anxiety.

### 3. Address the impact of disruptions to housing, education and transition plans

It is clear that Covid-19 has caused much disruption to the lives of young people leaving care often leading to crisis situations or further transitions. Young people should have clear information about supports available and clear routes for contact with professionals who can provide prompt advice and support, particularly at times of severe disruption or crisis.

## **4. Provide socially distant, face-to-face support**

As the Covid-19 context continues, it is important that clear policies and procedures are put in place to allow a mix of scheduled telephone and online contact alongside a commitment to some face-to-face contact so young people who need this level of contact are not feeling isolated and unsupported.

## **5. Communicate effectively about changes to services due to restrictions**

It is important that, as changes to routine service delivery are made, young people need clear and accessible information about these changes. A transparent approach, clearly advising care leavers of the level and type of services they can expect at different stages of the pandemic would be helpful.

## **6. Promote the participation of young people in decisions and plans**

As young people should be at the centre of key decisions affecting their lives, in the context of the ongoing pandemic, it is important to consider innovative approaches to actively involving young people in decision making processes. These can include involvement in virtual meetings where decisions affecting their lives are considered but also closer consultation with young people as family members, carers and professionals make decisions on the basis of presenting needs and risks.

## **7. Provide additional practical support**

Whilst some young people were content with the level of support received, several specifically referred to practical supports that could have been more readily available. These included: provision of more food parcels; access to IT equipment and vouchers to purchase data in order to keep in touch with formal and informal supports; and additional financial support due to reduced income and increased costs of utility bills. As these practical challenges will affect their standard of living, health and wellbeing and social opportunities, it is important that service providers target some resources towards helping young people with these practical issues to ensure their basic needs are met at these challenging times.

## **8. Recognise important milestones and transitions in the young person's life**

Milestones are important periods in a young person's life and, during the pandemic, it would be useful to consider how, and in what ways, these milestones could be given greater recognition, particularly for young people with very limited informal networks.

## **9. Support endings and transitions during the pandemic**

Young people also need support during these major transitions including help with finances to pursue education and support to set up new homes. Greater emphasis should be placed on supporting these transitions in a way that reduces anxieties in the context of Covid-19 and places focus on new opportunities.

## **10. Address the emotional wellbeing and mental health of care leavers**

Mental health and wellbeing was a major issue for the majority of young people. Assisting young people to use and develop self-care strategies would be useful. For those with more acute levels of anxiety, depression or distress, services must be more easily accessible. There have been some efforts to link therapeutic services to aftercare teams, however, these findings indicate a need for more targeted and comprehensive, inter-agency mental health services for care leavers during the ongoing pandemic.

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## Notes



## Notes



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