



Submission to Education and Skills Committee inquiry into the impact of coronavirus on vulnerable children and young people

May 2020

Includem welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into the practical problems that relate to the Coronavirus pandemic as it impacts on vulnerable children and young people.

Background

Our Mission: To believe in young people and support them to unlock their strengths so they can fulfil their full potential. To work with families and communities to deliver lasting change.

Our Vision: Every young person has the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential and participate in all aspects of life and society.

Includem is a specialist Scottish Charity, working with vulnerable young people (aged 5 to 25) and their families – those who will not or cannot engage with mainstream services, to build resilience. We see potential in all young people and families and provide practical and emotional support towards positive life changes. Those we work with reside in Scotland's 20% most deprived areas. Our services currently run in Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Fife, Stirling and West Dunbartonshire.

The support we provide is shaped by young people; responding to their individual needs, and the needs of their families in the community they live in. This enables them to make lasting positive changes and become independent of services. We have strong independent evidence to show this approach works. Includem is a trauma informed organisation, identifying and managing impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Includem's approach is rooted in developing and sustaining trusting relationships and using these relationships as the catalyst for change.

We offer:

- **Trusted, one-to-one relationship:** helping young people and their families to understand their situation and work to make positive lasting change.
- **Responsive service:** intensive, practical and emotional one-to-one support when needed most (daytime, evening, weekends) supported by our 24/7 helpline.
- **Route to a better life:** empower young people and their carers with confidence and tools to take control, find paths to a better life, and resilience to manage challenges.
- **Family work:** practical and emotional support for the whole family where needed.
- **Supporting transitions:** advice and guidance at critical points on the road to independence from services.

The impact of coronavirus

The majority of the young people Includem support are vulnerable through a range of reasons including: being on the child protection register; looked after; on the edge of care; being in conflict with the law; being affected by poverty and deprivation.

The fact that vulnerable children and young people will be among a group that is disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 is already well documented. Our young people and families are reporting an increase in domestic violence, family conflict, fuel and food poverty and decrease in their mental wellbeing. The detrimental impact of these factors on young people is also well documented.

In this submission Includem will focus on the three issues which have become most apparent for the young people and families that we support, and which we think have not been adequately represented or documented to date:

- Digital inclusion
- Complete disengagement with education
- Better engagement with education through remote means

Digital Inclusion

Includem recently conducted a survey into the extent of digital inclusion amongst our young people and families. We surveyed 150 families.

20% of those surveyed said that they did not have the devices the family needed to access online education and maintain contact with friends and family.

This is in direct contrast to the results of the Lockdown Lowdown survey conducted by The Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot which showed 99% of young people had access to a device at home. We would suggest that a survey conducted online that reports on access to devices and data etc is flawed and only captures the voices of those who already have their voices heard in other forums.

Many funding bodies have made available funds to third sector agencies to facilitate the purchasing of devices for vulnerable families, including £5 million from Connecting Scotland. Our survey highlighted that **33% of our families are unable to pay for access to the internet, maintenance of devices or replacing breakages without causing financial difficulty.** We contend that it is not sufficient to provide devices but that more is needed to provide greater ongoing financial support to those experiencing poverty and poverty related digital exclusion.

It is likely that young people will be accessing most of their education remotely for some time to come. Our young people are already adversely affected by the poverty related attainment gap which will only widen without consistent and financially secure access to devices and data which supports their remote learning.

Complete disengagement with education

Many of the young people we work with have a difficult and, at times, conflictual relationship with education. Many do not have an interest in learning or find it difficult to engage with learning in

traditional educational settings. For many, this leads to informal and formal exclusions. Includem works alongside young people and families to prevent this where possible as we recognise the link between exclusion from school and the increased likelihood of coming into conflict with the law.

During the time of lockdown and school closures we have seen many young people completely disengage from any form of learning. For most, their routines are significantly disrupted, turning night into day, and they are not contactable during normal school hours. These young people will not receive any personal support from their schools. Includem believes there is a significant risk that these young people will not engage in a return to education if it is on a part time basis as their routine and lifestyle will not support it. There is a risk that their parents are then prosecuted, or they are referred to the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) for their non-attendance.

Includem would like to see specific planning by Education departments on how to re-engage these young people in their school communities and how the third sector can be used to support their return to learning. For many of these young people a return to learning may not mean a return to school and consideration needs to be given for what remote or offsite learning facilities might be needed to meet the needs of this small but significant cohort of young people.

Better engagement with education through remote means

Conversely, we have also identified that young people we support have become more engaged with their learning when the pressure of attending school has been removed. We have heard the same from our colleagues in residential childcare settings.

Includem suggests that hearing from these young people and how they could be supported in different ways to engage in learning and education in the future should inform the virtual school agenda and development. We would like to see access to virtual schools extended to include all vulnerable young people finding it difficult to engage in traditional school-based education, not just those who are formally looked after.

Conclusion

Today's young people are already at risk of becoming a lost generation because of the global pandemic but the young people Includem support, along with other vulnerable young people, are even more so, with lifelong consequences of unemployment, insecure housing and poor health all related to poor education outcomes. The work of the Education and Skills Committee needs to be linked to the wider policy agenda of childhood poverty and actions taken to reduce the poverty related attainment gap, which is more acutely experienced by vulnerable children and young people.

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