



## **Includem submission to Equalities and Human Rights Committee inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on equalities and human rights**

June 2020

Includem welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into the impact on vulnerable children and young people's rights of the Coronavirus pandemic.

### **We are Includem**

**Our mission:** To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families and communities.

**Our vision:** A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

We are a Scottish charity working closely with children, young people, and their families, who are facing difficult challenges in their lives. Our trust-based, inclusive model of support is centred on the needs of each young person. We help young people make positive life choices and empower them to transform their lives; creating better outcomes for young people and their communities.

### **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. Young people and families we support 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:

- Family support
- Impact of poverty
- Digital inclusion

## Family Support

The recently released report by Scottish Government and SOLACE on vulnerable young people highlighted that third sector organisations are reporting an increase in families seeking support through helplines and webchats. This is not translating into referrals to social work for statutory support. Despite referrals being down, the number of Child Protection Orders (CPOs) taken in the last week in April increased by 38% from the 2019 level.<sup>i</sup>

Clearly many families are not receiving the holistic support that they need right now. Statutory agencies are restricted in the level of monitoring and support they can provide due to social distancing requirements and Includem is concerned that the impact of this is a lower threshold of risk resulting in more young people coming into care. It is already established that young people experiencing poverty are 10 times more likely to come into care.<sup>ii</sup>

**These children have come into care at a time when the measures to protect their rights, enshrined in Article 25 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), have been reduced due to the Coronavirus (Scotland) 2020 Act which extended the timescales for review of the granting of CPOs by Children Hearings.** When the Act was passed it was probably not expected that there would be such a sharp rise in children coming into care through these orders and the need for greater scrutiny.

- *What scrutiny is Scottish Government applying to the increase in numbers of children coming into care?*
- *What is Scottish Government doing to support Children's Hearing Scotland to resume face-to-face hearings where young people can exert their rights, have their voices heard and proper scrutiny is applied to decisions about young people coming into care?*
- *What is in place to ensure that the extension to timescales of review enacted by the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act is only in place for the shortest possible time?*

## Impact of Poverty

Research from the University of Loughborough has found that rates of child poverty over the last five years have continued to increase in many areas of Scotland. To our collective shame, Glasgow Central has seen the second highest increase in child poverty in the UK, sitting at over 40% in 2019. Over 40%, before coronavirus.<sup>iii</sup>

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has released a study on the financial impact on families of coronavirus. The findings were stark, with one in five families describing themselves as being in "serious financial difficulty" and a further 29% saying that they were "struggling to make ends meet".<sup>iv</sup>

**Article 27 of the UNCRC enshrines the right for children to have a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and support their development.** Governments

must help families to provide this where they cannot afford it themselves. Universal Credit is not sufficient to meet these needs, particularly for large families who have their benefits capped. Many of the emergency measures to increase benefits are not reaching the families they need due to the benefits cap.<sup>v</sup>

The report by Scottish Government and SOLACE has addressed the financial implications of Covid-19. Yet the report spoke of 'low income families', of those in 'financial distress'. It did not speak of poverty. How can we hope to rid Scotland of poverty if we don't call it out for what it is?

Includem is concerned that many families who were experiencing entrenched poverty before coronavirus are now being pushed further into poverty and hardship. Before coronavirus, children from impoverished families were ten times more likely to come into care. They have lower educational attainment and poorer short and long term physical and mental health. These are the same families that come from the poorest communities with the least community resources to assist them in practical ways and in representing their experiences.<sup>vi</sup> **These children and families are not afforded their rights to express their thoughts and opinions or to access the information they need to improve their situation. These are families who do not have a voice.**

We are further concerned that the studies, surveys and reports that Scottish Government is relying on for information are not representative of the population. For example, the IPPR findings were gathered through an online survey from families who signed up to participate in YouGov surveys – families who are digitally and socially connected.<sup>vii</sup>

Includem is concerned that if economic and policy decisions are based only on the voices that are heard, such as those included in the IPPR report, there is a distinct danger that those whose voices are lost get left even further behind.

The gap between the haves and the have nots is already wide. If we do not address the experiences of those in entrenched poverty and find a way to really hear their experiences to inform our government policies, then the gap will continue to widen.

- *What will Scottish Government do to ensure that the voices of the most disadvantaged are heard and considered in the development of government policy?*
- *How will Scottish Government ensure that those families experiencing entrenched poverty have a minimum income which is sufficient for them to maintain a standard of life which meets their physical and social needs?*

## **Digital Inclusion and impact on participation**

Includem recently conducted a survey of over half of the young people and families we support.

**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.

Includem welcomed Scottish Government's recent announcement of £30 million to provide disadvantaged young people with laptops to support home learning. 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.

**11% do not have devices with video call functionality, with 1 in 4 saying using video calling would put pressure on their data allowances.**

Video calling and teleconferencing is being widely adopted by many statutory services and third sector organisations. At Includem we are also using video calls to provide the emotional support families need and in high risk situations. Whilst most young people and families can use video calls on their devices without great concern about the impact on their bills, the fact that there is a number that can't is a potential barrier to engaging with services, and could lead to greater social isolation.

If we have learnt anything from the Independent Care Review, it's that children and young people who enter the current care system in Scotland feel their voice gets lost. We know that this has been increased by the current circumstances and were shocked by the findings of our study that showed that young people in Local Authority children's units were amongst the most of our digitally excluded young people.

Many of the statutory services, including social work and the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration are now holding meetings remotely and are encouraging participation from young people and families through video and tele conferencing. **To exert and protect their rights it is imperative that children, young people and families are able to participate in decisions that affect them and their families.** Families tell us that they already feel disempowered and their voices are often not heard in formal meetings and decision-making forums. This will only increase if they do not have access to devices and data that supports their participation.

- *What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that children, young people and families who experience entrenched poverty are able to stay digitally connected without financial burden?*

## 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, through the lifelong consequences of entrenched poverty. The current levels of poverty experienced by these families inhibits their rights in so many ways – their right to express their views;

their right to the best possible health, including nutritious food; their right to a good enough standard of living; and their right to relax, play and participate. Recent research conducted by young people about the link between deprivation and health inequalities demonstrates this through young people's own voices.<sup>viii</sup>

The problem requires more than a £10 Scottish Child Poverty Payment. We have an opportunity to build anew rather than rebuild. What would an economy based on the wellbeing of these families look like? What would our society look like if Scottish Government took the opportunity to rebuild with the voice of the young people and their knowledge and understanding of poverty?

**For more information please contact:** [meg.thomas@includem.co.uk](mailto:meg.thomas@includem.co.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/vulnerable-children-report-15-2020-scottish-government-solace/>

<sup>ii</sup> 2018 Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Jones, C., Sparks, T., Elliott, M., Hooper, J., McCarten, C., Shapira, M., Bunting, L., Daniel, B. (2018). Child welfare inequalities in the four nations of the UK. Journal of Social Work online

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/local-child-poverty-data-201415-20189/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.ippr.org/blog/covid-19-how-are-families-with-children-faring-so-far>

<sup>v</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/has-government-forgotten-children-during-covid-19>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/about-us/our-work/the-evidence-sessions/>

<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.standardlifefoundation.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/57432/COVID-19-Tracker-April-2020-FINAL.pdf](https://www.standardlifefoundation.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/57432/COVID-19-Tracker-April-2020-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/health-inequalities-participative-research-project/>