



Project Connect-19:

Supporting care experienced young people disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Project Connect-19

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Document prepared by:

Dr. Ashleigh McGregor, PhD, BSc (Hons)
Research and Information Officer
Kibble Education and Care Centre



Case Study: Rose ^

Rose is a 17-year-old female who was referred to the project by her key worker at a day services facility. She has been living independently in the community for two months. Rose requested support in areas of mental health/counselling, self-care evenings, social isolation, virtual meetings, transitions support, peer mentoring/befriending, digital/broadband and socially distanced activities.

A member of the team had an online meeting with Rose to discuss her needs and which services she would benefit from. She disclosed that she found living on her own was difficult and she felt socially isolated a lot of the time. She felt her mental health was suffering and she missed meeting socially with her friends and family.

Rose also receives a mobile telephone and a monthly top-up voucher so that she can take part with all online activities. Rose attends weekly online counselling sessions and receives transitions advice on college courses available to her. Rose also has online chats with a befriender and takes part in the group activities online.

Rose's Feedback:

This is the best project I have ever been referred to. The staff support me constantly which helps with my anxiety. I don't want this project to finish as I have met some friends online and I have learned to cook, I could not cook before the project. I was on a waiting list for counselling, and it was for a very long time.

^ The names of all young people featured have been changed to protect their identity.

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1 Executive Summary

Care experienced young people are known to be faced with challenges and barriers to successful independent living at higher rates than their non-care experienced peers. The current report examines data collected during a project in which a newly formed team supported care leavers who live or are preparing to live independently and have been disproportionately affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in 2020/21.

Upon referral, all participants on the project were asked to identify which of the following key areas they would like support with: social isolation, general health and wellbeing, and transitions. To combat social isolation and promote mental health a host of specific services were made available to young people including: mental health counselling, peer mentoring and befriending, online social engagement nights (including cooking and self-care evenings), alongside a host of available transitions support. Connect-19 also supported care experienced young people to maintain independent living by providing advice and signposting relevant to; housing, tenancy, welfare, benefits, debt management, employment, legal issues, cooking and eating well, and maintaining health during lockdown.

Following the identification of support needs at the point of referral, participants firstly engaged with supportive individualised interventions over the period of the project. A thematic analysis of case notes was conducted with the aim of identifying the challenges experienced by care experienced people living or preparing to live independently during the initial pandemic response and to report on the effectiveness of the supports put in place by the Project Connect-19 team for service users.

NB: Please note all names of young people have been changed to protect their identity.

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Case Study: Bob

Bob is a 19-year-old male who has been living independently in the community for 11 months. He was brought up in the care system and was referred to the project by his social worker. Bob still relied on the support of his social worker, however due to his age and living independently this support was very little. Bob expressed that he found living independently a struggle due to the small amount of benefits that he had to live on each month. He found that after buying food and paying for electricity he had no money left for a mobile phone or top up vouchers to keep in touch with his family.

Bob met with two advisors from the project to discuss what type of support would be best for him going forward. Throughout Bob's meeting he discussed that he would like to speak to someone about his mental health as he was feeling depressed and did not like being away from his family members. He felt that COVID-19 impacted his mental health greatly leaving him feeling sad and alone. Bob also requested some support to manage his money more sensibly as he was spending it the day he got it and then had nothing left for 13 days which meant sometimes he was going without food. Bob was very interested in the online activities and wanted to take part in the cooking and self-care nights. He also stated it would be good to speak to people 'in the same boat'.

Bob was referred to the mental health counsellors where he has a weekly session with a qualified therapist, he was also supported with money management from the transition's advisor. He received a mobile telephone and monthly tops up so that he could keep in touch with his counsellor and join the online activities. Additionally, Bob receives a weekly recipe box, and also takes part in the group meetings online.

Bob's Feedback:

I am so happy that my social worker referred me to the project as I feel better when I talk about my feelings. This has been great. I like getting the cooking boxes and going online to take part in the activities. I will not know what to do when this project has finished because I might go back to feeling alone and depressed.

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Testimonials and Young People's Feedback

Abigail: I absolutely love this project; it gives me something different to do each week. I especially like the online activities and I take part in all of them. I can't believe all the support I am getting during COVID-19. I will be sad when the project is over because I have never had support like this since living independently.

Ruth: I really enjoy the online activities and it stops me being bored. I like the other people in the group, and I think we have a lot in common because we seem to have the same problems. I love this project because the support is so good, and the people are nice. I love the reading group and the recipe boxes.

Anna: I really like this project, but I have some personal issues at the moment, and I do not feel like taking part. The team have been kind to me, and I know I can always get support if I need it.

Rita: Thank you for involving me in the project. I know I sometimes don't turn up, but I still want to take part when I am feeling good. The staff have been so supportive and always encourage me to join in.

Roberto: I love this project; the online stuff is good, and I like the recipe boxes every week. I would like to go fishing but I can't because of lockdown. Hopefully I will be able to go soon.

Liam: Thank you for helping me to find a job as that's important to me. I want to go to work and pay my bills when I move to live on my own. I am a hard worker and I want to prove myself.

Cameron: The project is good; I like the counselling sometimes but at other times it can be difficult. I will keep trying to engage.

Lisa: I love this project and I don't want it to end.

Frederick: Thank you for the support during this difficult period in my life.

Joe: I was supposed to get my own house but because of lockdown I can't move. I feel stuck but the advisor has helped me to understand what money I will get and how to pay bills on my own. I am looking forward to having my own house and I feel better knowing that I have support in place to help me to do that.

Daniel: My social worker told me of this project, and it has really helped me. I do the

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online social nights and I have met some nice people. I get top ups for my phone which means I can keep in touch with everyone, especially my mum who I can't see because she is shielding. She is on her own and I would not be able to talk to her if I did not have the top ups.

Rebecca: I have been suffering from social isolation and low mood since COVID-19 happened. I can't go anywhere, and I feel stuck in the one place all the time. I can't see my friends the way I used to, and this makes me feel really down. Someone from my old residential unit called me and told me about the project. I really enjoy taking part in the online activities. There is always something different happening and I get along great with the staff who keep in touch. I'm worried about when the project ends as I look forward to catching up with other people and I like the stuff the project does.

Oscar: Thank you for setting me up on the activities page, it gives me something to do when the days are long. I enjoy the fitness and online stuff.

Ava: I want to say thank you to the staff on the project for trying to help me. I thought I could live in a different area and get better on my own. I was lonely all of the time and missed my boyfriend. I wanted to go home and see my friends and family. I know I can contact the project if I need support.

Ronnie: I honestly do not know where I would be if it was not for this project. They have provided food for me when I had none. They have provided the best support I have ever had since leaving care. I don't feel so alone now that I have other people to talk to. I could not do that because I did not have a phone or internet. I feel like part of the world again and I do not know what I will do when this project closes. I have anxiety about that as I have made some good friends online and I rely on the recipe boxes and the internet. I want to say thank you to everyone on that project because they are all brilliant. The staff always check in with me which is so nice.

Bob: I am so happy that my social worker referred me to the project as I feel better when I talk about my feelings. This has been great. I like getting the boxes and going online to take part in the activities. I will not know what to do when this project has finished because I might go back to feeling alone and depressed.

Jessica: Thank you for supporting me to keep in touch with people.

Jack: I cannot thank the project enough as I really did not have any idea what I was supposed to do with paying bills and managing money when living on my own. I now have my benefits sorted and the team keep in touch with me to offer support. I love the self-

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care nights online and the support is amazing. I would like to thank all the staff who have helped me.

Benny: I don't like that people can't come and visit me as it means I can't see my friends. I like to see people's faces when I am speaking as it makes me feel better. I like the project and I speak to a counsellor every week which I really like now. I always get nice stuff as well and I like the cooking boxes as I am a good cook.

Lauren: Life can be overwhelming for me sometimes, it's good to be able to talk to someone when I feel the need. I don't always go to the sessions, but I am grateful for them.

Kay: I always have someone to talk to on this project which helps with my anxiety. I am supposed to be moving to live independently and the staff have supported me to find a college course that I like. I feel better knowing that I have stuff to do when I leave care. I feel more independent now. Thank you.

Gillian: I found the first lockdown due to COVID-19 extremely difficult to deal with as I was socially isolated, and no one could come into my house to check on me. I had no one to talk to. Now that I am part of Project Connect 19, I feel much better mentally as I have people to talk to whenever I want.

Brian: I like the project and the spreadsheet for my bills really helps me to see what I can spend and what I need to keep for bills. I keep in touch with the staff and they always update me on the support available.

Reg: Thank you for getting me a counsellor quickly, it helps with mental health issues.

Amy: I can't thank the project staff enough for involving me in the project. I have been in the care system my whole life and I have felt judged every day since leaving care. I am a very independent person who believes in hard work. I would love to run a project for care experienced myself one day as I completely understand how it feels to be judged. Many people do not understand how difficult it can be to transition from care into the community. There is not a lot of support or help when we need it. We have all these structures in place to help us through a difficult life and then you reach a certain age, and it is all taken away from you. You need to be strong to survive, but the sad reality is not everyone can be. I am one of the lucky ones. We need more of these projects in place to help vulnerable care experienced people.

Elliott: Thanks to the project for the support, they have given me, especially to my counsellor who always helps me to see that everything will be ok. I wish lockdown was

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over as I do not like it.

Ernie: I don't know what I am supposed to do when the project finishes. I like the project, but I would like it to be on all the time as I get the support I need, and I can speak to the staff any time I like.

Lee: Our favourite activity was making cupcakes as we decorated them any way we wanted. Being part of the fun activities has meant we can get better at cooking and has made us better at working together instead of one of us doing it all. A highlight for us has been getting all the ingredients and following the recipes. For anyone joining it's a very good idea as its very helpful and has gave us a better understanding on how to cook certain things and follow instructions.

David: I like the project; I like the counselling as it helps me to focus on what I am doing in life. The support that I get is great and I like the boxes. I wish the project could last for longer.

Zach: I really like the project as it supports me to do stuff that I like. I like the food boxes and the self-care boxes, and I like talking to the staff. The staff are always available and always check in on me. This has helped me to talk about my feelings.

Sonya: I don't like to talk to a lot of people as I am a very private person. I want to go to college, and it seems really difficult to get in, but the project is helping me to choose something suitable.

Mark: I feel socially isolated a lot of the time. This project has helped me to find people who are in the same boat so it's good that we can all get through it together. It's good to know that I have someone to talk to when I am feeling low. I would like to go to college, but I am unsure at the moment.

Nancy: This project has helped me with feeling socially isolated. I was about to move into my own home, however that had to change because of the pandemic. Someone always calls to see how I am which is nice. It would be good if the project was on all the time and not just for a few months as you get to know the staff and then they just disappear. The activities are good and give me something to do.

Max: The project has been good for me as I felt socially isolated as no one could visit me and vice versa. I now speak with a befriender online and I attend the quiz nights which breaks my week up. The project staff keep in touch and I know I can contact them if I feel low.

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Nikki: I was feeling quite lost when I was referred to the project. I have been in care for years and then all of a sudden, I was alone in my own house and pregnant. I find meeting new people difficult; however, I enjoyed meeting people from the project as they were nice. I needed support to understand the services available to me as I did not know I would get help with a new baby. I like having someone to talk to and I enjoy the online counselling. I also take part in some of the activities which are fun. Thank you for your support.

Sally: Thank you for helping me to find a job and sorting my rent out.

Dom: Thank you for supporting me through some difficult times.

Taylor: I will be living on my own soon and I was not sure if I must pay my bills. Sometimes it's difficult thinking of being independent but I am glad I have support in place to keep me right.

Peter: I sometimes feel alone during lockdown but it's good to have this project as I know I can go online or phone someone when I want. I have had lots of support during lockdown which has been good.

Doris: I did not know that you could get a good bursary if you were care experienced, no one has ever told me that. I never went to college because I didn't think I could afford it. I have applied for some courses and I am excited about that.

Jeremy: I did not like being socially isolated during lockdown as I could not meet with any of my family as I was in care. I was ready to become independent and then everything stopped, and I could not leave. I like having someone to talk to now and I have support to help me get into college. I hope COVID-19 goes away soon.

Robbie: Thank you for giving me the information I need as I don't know when I will be able to live independently.

2 Acknowledgments

Project Connect-19 Team: Sandra Guiney, Lee Muir, Joan McGoogan, counsellors and volunteer.

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Renfrewshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, North Ayrshire Council, South Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council.

Case Study: Rosie

Rosie is a 20-year-old female who was referred to the project by her old key worker at the residential care house where she lived before moving to the community. Rosie has been living independently for 10 months. Rosie states that COVID-19 has had a very negative impact on her life, resulting in her baby son being taken into foster care. She was at home all the time with a new baby and no one could visit her. Rosie is originally from another authority, however she decided to stay in the same authority as her residential care house. She felt safer and more supported. This meant she could not see any of her friends and family. Rosie's mental health deteriorated rapidly, and she was detained under the mental health act, spending several months in a psychiatric unit.

Rosie disclosed that she felt a lot better mentally and now had her baby back in her care. She said she would like to try some counselling as she did not want to ever go back to that dark place. She also felt socially isolated as she could not visit anyone, she said she would like a befriender/volunteer, someone she could go for a socially distanced walk with or a coffee. She also wanted to connect with people her age and start a beauty course at college.

Rosie was referred to the project's counselling services to cope with her mental health, she was also assigned a transitions advisor and a befriender. The transitions advisor supported Rosie to apply for a beauty course at a local college, one with a nursery for her baby. Rosie got involved with counselling, however after two sessions she disengaged as she found it too difficult. Rosie currently engages well with her befriender and they meet on a weekly basis.

Rosie's Feedback:

I like the support I get from the project but I'm not ready to do counselling just yet. I enjoy meeting up with my befriender as she is really nice. I can get overwhelmed with life and she supports me at difficult times.

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Case Study: Ronnie

Ronnie is a 25-year-old male referred to the project by Preparation for Life. He has lived independently for 11 months. Ronnie requested support in areas of mental health, social isolation, social nights, peer mentoring/befriending, transitions support and socially distanced activities. He had no access to broadband and did not have a mobile telephone to keep in touch with the team. The first thing the team did was to issue Ronnie with a mobile telephone and top up voucher.

The Project Manager arranged a skype call to explore areas of support and to find out how Ronnie was coping with lockdown measures. Ronnie disclosed that his mental health was suffering due to lack of contact with friends and family as he had to shield due to poor health. He disclosed that he had no one to talk to and was often left with no money to buy food as he had to use his money to pay for electricity because he was in the house all day and it was really cold.

Ronnie was added to the online activities where he could talk to others and take part in the online cooking tutorials and fitness programmes. He receives a weekly recipe box where he cooks within the online group and shares pictures of the food they have made. Ronnie also takes part in the reading club online and has received books of his choice. Ronnie speaks weekly to the team and has been signposted to local foodbanks and advocacy support. He keeps in touch with the team daily through the project Facebook page.

Ronnie was also referred to mental health counselling and receives weekly sessions which he enjoys. He has arranged some socially distanced activities with a project befriender, however that has been put on hold due to new lockdown measures. This will resume when the rules change.

Ronnie's Feedback:

I honestly do not know where I would be if it was not for this project. They have provided the best support I have ever had since leaving care. I don't feel so alone now that I have other people to talk to. I could not do that because I did not have a phone or internet. I feel like part of the world again and I do not know what I will do when this project closes. I have anxiety about that as I have made some good friends online and I rely on the recipe boxes and the internet. I want to say thank you to everyone on that project because they are all brilliant. The staff always check in with me which is so nice.

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Case Study: Amy

Amy, aged 24, referred herself to Project Connect-19 via Facebook. Amy has lived independently for a year. She has a young baby. Amy felt lonely in the house with a new baby and asked for support to connect with other young people who might be in the same position as her. She also likes to take part in the online cooking and baking tutorials. Amy is a very independent and determined person, she takes pride in paying her own way and looking after her baby. Amy states that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on her life as she has not been able to get out much in the community and she would like to attend more groups such as mother and toddler groups.

Amy was assigned a befriender and a transitions advisor. The befriender checks in with Amy on a weekly basis and delivers recipe boxes. This allows Amy to interact with other young people involved in the project. The transitions advisor signposted her to online forums for new mums and baby information sites. Amy also received some health boxes to help with anxiety and loneliness.

Amy's Feedback: I cannot thank the project staff enough for involving me in the project. I have been in the care system my whole life and I have felt judged every day since leaving care. I am a very independent person who believes in hard work. I would love to run a project for care experienced myself one day as I completely understand how it feels to be judged. Many people do not understand how difficult it can be to transition from care into the community. There is not a lot of support or help when we need it. We have all these structures in place to help us through a difficult life and then you reach a certain age, and it is all taken away from you. You need to be strong to survive, but the sad reality is not everyone can be. I am one of the lucky ones.

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4 Introduction

On average, care experienced people in Scotland begin living independently at 17 years old, earlier than their non-care experienced peers, at 25 years old on average (Hill, 2013). Transitioning from care can present various novel challenges for young care leavers who potentially face additional barriers compared to their non-care experienced peers (McGregor, 2020). Indeed, the care experienced population have been shown to be at higher risk of poor outcomes such as unemployment, homelessness, and mental health concerns (McGregor, 2020; Meltzer et al., 2003; ONS, 2004).

In recent times young people transitioning from care also have the additional pressures related to the current COVID-19 Pandemic to consider when planning a transition or successfully maintaining independent living with many new challenges to consider. Indeed, Who Cares? Scotland's recent report on the impact of COVID-19 in May 2020 shows a high level of engagement with their helpline set up in response to COVID-19 with 134 calls on average per week from care experienced people. Who Cares? Scotland also report that more than half of the 127 advocacy requests being supported were with young care experienced people, with an average age of 21, living independently in their own homes. It was found that 40% of the 172 advocacy issues raised were directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Who Cares? Scotland, 2020). In addition, 39% of callers expressed that they faced financial difficulties due to the impact of COVID-19 and sought financial assistance.

To support and promote the success of care experienced people during this time, the Connect-19 project provided individualised and flexible support to young people leaving or who have recently left care. It is vital for young care leavers to be given opportunities to develop relevant skill sets and supports to be adequately prepared for independent living, however, young people may find that the services and organisations they usually rely on may be unavailable or unreliable due to the closure, disruption, or restriction of services. In addition, many young people may be facing changes in circumstances around the availability of educational/training programmes as well as potentially threats to employment and financial/housing security therefore the project aimed to provide a wraparound service incorporating transitions support which included signposting to benefits officers and educational advisors at local establishments.

In addition, social distancing and travel restrictions may also prevent young people from accessing their usual social supports such as social networks, communities, and

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resources therefore, it was also a priority for Project Connect-19 to respond to the impact of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions upon personal wellbeing, mental health, and social isolation.

The support needs of young people at this time may be somewhat unpredictable as the impact of the current pandemic is unprecedented, however, the Connect-19 project aimed to provide a wraparound flexible service able to respond to individual needs with supports available including access to; online support, befriending service, activities to reduce social isolation, digital support where access to technology is a barrier, transitions advice and mental health support. The National Lottery funding has enabled the construction of a new project support team and the development of a new model of service, expanding the supports available to help care experienced young people who live, or are preparing to live, independently who are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic in the areas of Glasgow, Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, North, South and East Ayrshire, East and West Dunbartonshire.

The current report examines quantitative data collected from referrals and case studies of 51 participants enrolled in the Connect-19 project as well as qualitative data from participant case files. Findings showed that participants generally had more than one area of need for support with the majority suffering from social isolation as well as other significant challenges to personal wellbeing. The current paper outlines both the quantitative and qualitative findings related to the success of Project Connect-19; a project designed to support and encourage wellbeing in response to the outbreak and lockdown in Scotland.

The paper concludes with a summary of the evidence suggesting a need for the continuation or indeed expansion of a transitions service allowing care experienced people to remain connected to the care experienced community after leaving care. For Connect-19 participants, the project helped to manage the changes related to transitioning or having recently transitioned to independent living, alongside the changes related to COVID-19 and to build their resilience to these changes while continuing to be supported. In addition to helping to maintain the wellbeing of participants individually the project was seen to foster a sense of community among participants with similar life experiences and provided an avenue for care experienced people to remain connected to the wider care community while living independently.

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5 Project team

Role	Description
Project Manager and Transitions Advisor	Responsible for the overseeing of the project team, programmes, resources, and activities. The project manager was also responsible for transitions advice and support. Such as support with employment, signposting to other services, universal credit applications, other benefits, cv building, preparation for interviews and ensuring young people were referred to other agencies as appropriate.
Mental Health Counsellors and Practitioners	Drawn from members of the Specialist Interventions Team at Kibble and booked as required. The team includes counsellors with a wide range of professional backgrounds allowing for a wide range of therapeutic services to be delivered according to need including psychology, health and wellbeing, and counselling.
Youth Activities Co-ordinator	Responsible for the organisation of social activities including the resourcing, development and delivery of a social activities programme delivered primarily online including a cooking and eating well programme, a fitness, self-care and wellbeing programme and various other social activities such as quiz nights and reading groups.
Volunteer Co-ordinator	Responsible for the recruitment of 13 volunteers for the programme. It should be noted due to a combination of travel restrictions and the fact training was impacted, only one of our volunteers was able to start on the programme. The Volunteer Co-ordinator also supported the Activities Co-ordinator and Project Manager with delivery of online activities and provided support to ensure the project was able to continue helping young people while responding to the changing dynamics presented by COVID-19 restrictions.
Project Volunteers	While the volunteer support had to be scaled back due to COVID-19 restrictions, we did have one volunteer who was able to support the project while adhering to guidelines. They supported the programme in various ways including befriending and helping to deliver resources to young people ahead of related activities.

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5.1.1 Support activities/resources available

The Connect-19 project aims to provide individualised flexible, and participant led support including access to; mental health counselling, social supports, digital support, and transitions support to young people leaving or who have recently left care. This involved the construction of a new project support team and a new model of service expanding the supports available to assist care leavers in sustaining positive destinations as well as maintaining wellbeing of participants throughout the project's length.

- 1:1 and group mental health support delivered by trained counsellors and practitioners offered virtually and in person where safe to do so, this may include mindfulness, anxiety management, counselling, sleep hygiene and facilitation of more specialised support by external partners.
- A range of virtual and individual activities aimed at reducing social isolation such as baking, cooking, social nights, self-care evenings, socially distanced walks etc. Where cooking/baking is involved boxes of ingredients are delivered to the young person to ensure they can participate and healthy eating will be promoted.
- Transitions support in the areas of housing and welfare, benefits entitlement, debt management, legal issues and further education and training. This includes 1:1 support as well as group activities such as virtual meetings with experts offering advice and guidance.
- Online sessions focussing on lockdown rules, keeping safe online, general wellbeing followed by Q&A sessions. This may include presentations by other organisations such as citizens advice.
- Regular video group calls to young people to check in, offer support and provide opportunities for young people to safely network with each other.
- Setting up and management of a volunteer befriending/mentoring service. Volunteers will be matched carefully with a befriender/mentor. Activities undertaken will be a mix of those allowed during the different stages of physical distancing measures and virtual/telephone activities. This element funding has been impacted by pandemic restrictions with volunteers unable to travel.
- Phone top-ups, access to broadband or smart phones where this is a barrier.

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6 Methodology

Recruitment

6.1.1 By Referral

Referrals were made from the following organisations; Barnardo's, Fdemi, Homestart, Kibble, Glasgow City Council, Renfrewshire Council, East Renfrewshire Council, North Ayrshire Council, South Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council.

6.1.2 Paid Facebook Advertising

Paid Facebook advertising was implemented and allowed for highly targeted campaigns, increasing visibility of the project amongst key audiences located in the areas Project Connect-19 covered. The targeting included people who had a career related to residential care, social services, child protection, mental health counselling, youth clubs, Barnardo's, Action for Children and more. Our adverts reached those working in a relevant sector, who were likely to have a genuine interest in the service and potentially submit a referral enquiry. Users were encouraged to click "learn more" on the advert and were directed to our Kibble webpage further describing the details of Project Connect-19.

The overall reach was 144.3K people with the top performing advert being the advice carousel, which users scrolled through to find out what topics of advice young care leavers, who were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, were entitled to. The advice carousel outperformed static image and video adverts showcasing the activities or mental health support available through Project Connect-19. The advert copy which received the highest number of clicks began with "New service". This identifies that our audience were interested in learning about the latest service offered by Kibble and the National Lottery Community Fund. The carousel performed stronger than video clips and static images indicating the format helped convey the range of support available through Project Connect-19 in short, digestible chunks, before clicking through to learn more.

6.1.3 Non-Paid Social Media

Kibble shared Project Connect-19 information across social media. This further increased awareness and boosted visibility amongst our significant number of followers, which included similar organisations to Kibble and the National Lottery Community Fund and key decision makers within the care sector. The organic posts were seen by a minimum of 5.8K people. The colourful posts stood out and generated high engagement levels,

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with many wanting to re-share the positive anecdotes and photos. Overall, our organic posts received 178 shares, comments and likes. Plus, our posts were re-shared by Social Enterprise Scotland and their 20K following. This helped maximise the online reach of Project Connect-19.

Participants

Support from the Connect-19 team was made available to 51 participants who had recently transitioned to independent living or were getting ready to do so in one of the eight local authority areas in which the project supported. The eight local authority areas included East Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow, North Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, South Ayrshire, and West Dunbartonshire. While some participants did choose to temporarily disengage from the programme only one participant withdrew, due to moving out with the included catchment area. This young person was signposted to localised support and their data remains included as they received some support prior to withdrawal. Our Facebook campaign achieved the following results: 144,318 people reached and 1,769 clicks at a low cost per click of £0.57.

Age/gender of young people referred

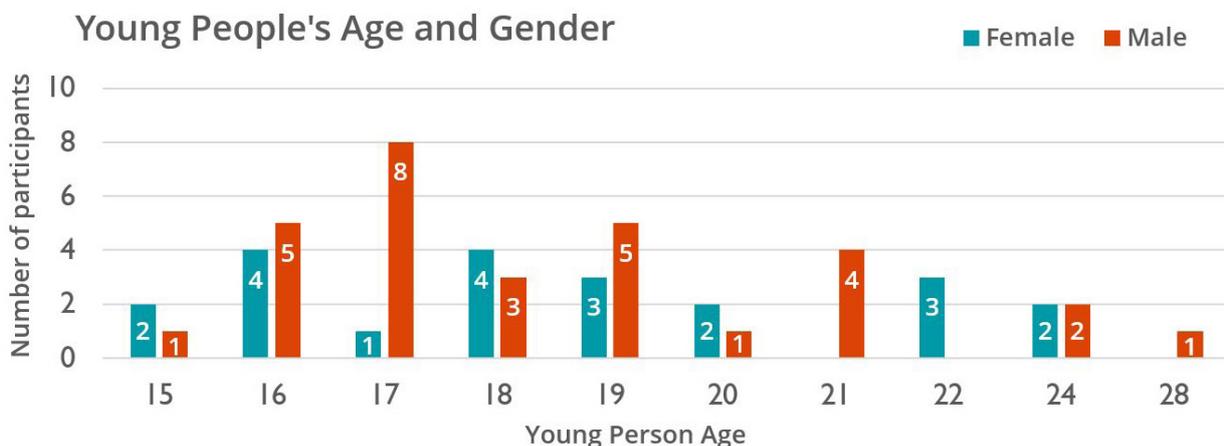


Figure 1: Participant age and gender

Fifty-one care experienced young people took part in Project Connect-19, thereby surpassing the target number of referrals. The mode (most common) age of participants was 17 while the average age of participants was found to be 19.07 (SD = 2.64), This skew suggests a higher number of younger participants than older participants. In addition, the average age of the 30 male participants was 19.13 while the average age of the 21 female participants was 19.24.

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Referral Routes

Figure 2: Participant referral routes

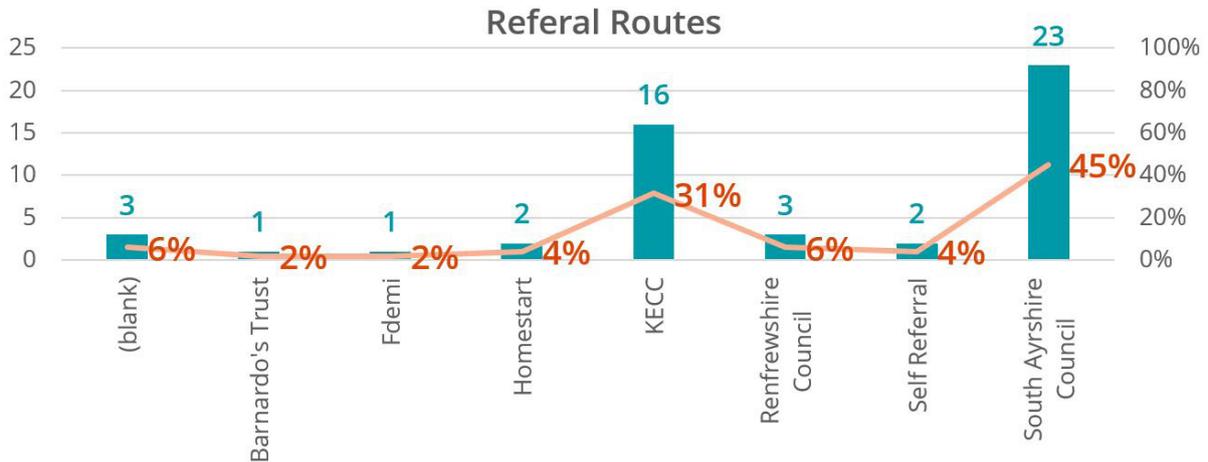


Figure 3: Participant Referral Routes

Figure 3 above shows that South Ayrshire Council provided 45% of referrals to Project Connect-19, the highest number of all referees. Following this a further 31% of referrals were provided by Kibble Education and Care Centre. The remaining 24% of referrals came from various sources such as Renfrewshire Council (6%), Barnardo’s (2%), Homestart (4%), Fdemi (2%), with 4% being self-referrals.

Length of time living independently at time of referral

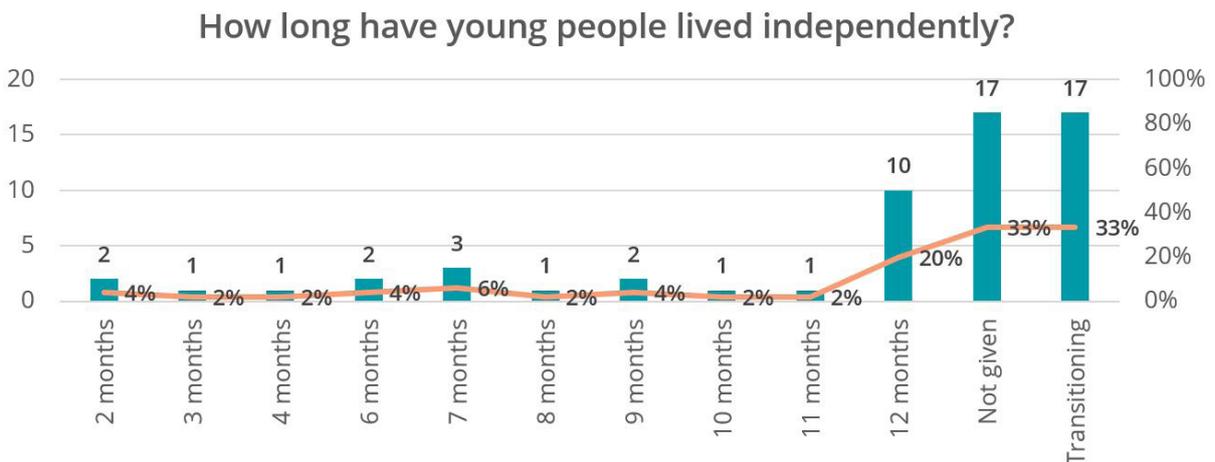


Figure 4: Time spent living independently at the point of referral

Figure 4 shows that young people were most likely to be referred to the project during transition or for up to one year later with a rise in referrals among those who had transitioned out of care one year prior to referral, and no referrals known to have transitioned earlier than this point.

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Materials

Referral interview: 51 participants completed a referral interview; none requested this data to be withdrawn upon their withdrawal from the project. This data was used to produce the findings relevant to the quantitative analysis. The analysis consisted of reporting on descriptive statistics such as averages and frequencies as well as inferential statistics such as correlations where appropriate to examine the strength of relationships between types of support requested.

Case notes: Case notes supplied for 51 participants were coded to identify themes and comments which explore the impact of COVID-19 and the related restrictions upon young people's personal wellbeing and ability to progress/sustain their transition towards independent living.

Procedure

At the point of referral participants were asked to identify areas in which they would like support during an initial referral interview with a Project Connect-19 team member. The data gained during these interviews was quantitatively analysed while qualitative analysis was conducted using case notes. Connect-19 advisors recorded details of contact, support provided, and progress made using case notes and the engagement record.

Analysis

The analysis conducted in the current report are mixed method, thereby, integrating the quantitative approach and qualitative approach using frequency, correlation statistics, descriptive statistics, and the use of grounded theory to code the qualitative materials.

Coding of qualitative data

An adapted variation of grounded theory was used to code the case notes qualitatively. Using this method case notes were examined using the following steps:

1. Line by line read through with semantic interpretation
2. Examination of commonalities and variations in semantic interpretations to develop draft themes and coding structure
3. Second line by line read through adhering to the draft coding structure and the development of a finalised thematic structure
4. Third read through adhering to the finalised coding structure

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7 Quantitative Findings

Support Requested

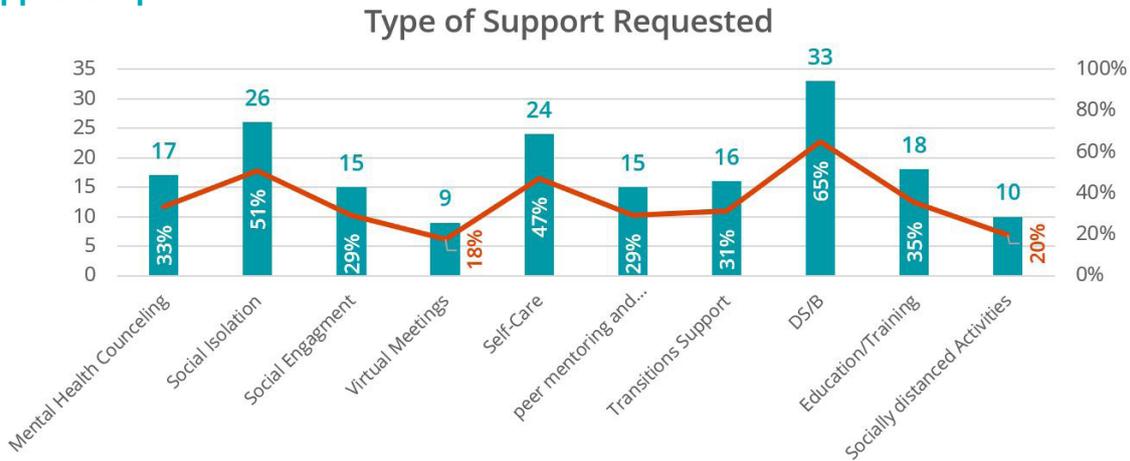


Figure 5: Type of Support Requested

Participants on average requested support with 3.58 of the 10 areas listed. The area of greatest need was found to be in access to digital support and broadband with 65% of young people requesting support in this area. Following this the areas of greatest support needs were found to be social isolation (51%), self-care (47%), mental health support (33%), education and training (35%), transitions support (31%), social engagement (29%), peer mentoring and befriending (29%), socially distanced activities (20%) and virtual meetings (18%).

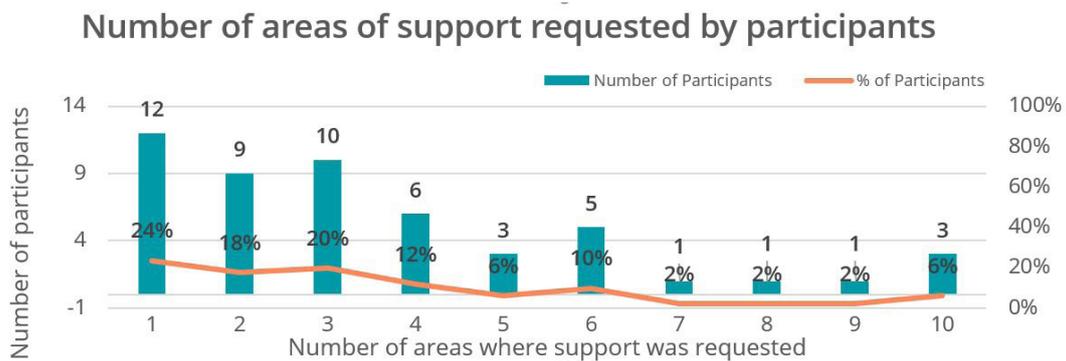


Figure 6: Number of areas of support requested

Participants on average requested help with 3.5 areas of support at the point of referral. 31 (62%) requested help with three areas or less, while 38% of participants requested support in four or more areas. This skew suggests that the majority were able to manage many aspects of independent living, requiring support in specific, targeted, and limited ways.

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Qualitative Findings

It was expected that the circumstances of the 2020 pandemic and restrictions would have an impact upon the personal wellbeing of care experienced young people as well as their ability to transition towards and successfully maintain independent living. Through examining the Project Connect-19 case notes, a qualitative analysis found six emerging themes which highlight commonalities in experience and support need among young people. These themes are described in the table below with further exploration, discussion, and inclusion of exemplar comments to follow.

Descriptions of Emerging Themes

Theme	Description
Impact of travel restrictions on transitions	Comments related to disruption of young people’s planned transitions from care to independent living during the project length.
The emotional and social impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing	Comments related to challenges, changes and support needs impacting upon a young person’s emotional wellbeing.
The psychological impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing	Comments related to challenges, changes and support needs impacting upon a young person’s psychological wellbeing.
The practical impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing	Comments related to challenges, changes and support needs impacting upon the practical support available to a young person in maintaining their personal wellbeing.
The physical impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing	Comments related to challenges, changes and support needs impacting upon a young person’s physical wellbeing.
The financial impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing	Comments related to challenges, changes and support needs impacting upon a young person’s financial wellbeing.

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Impact of restrictions on transitions to independent living

The case notes of participants were examined to highlight the impact of COVID-19 upon transitions and independent living. It was found that for many young people the COVID-19 restrictions had resulted in delays to planned transitions or disruption to preparations for transition. Some exemplar comments below evidence the negative impact of transition disruption on young people's wellbeing with many expressing frustration and anxieties related to transitioning out of care. In addition, 37% of those requesting transitions support also requested mental health counselling with many participants commenting on the concerns around transitions and how living independently impacted upon mental health suggesting that additional social, emotional, and psychological support may be required during the period of transition specifically, this being a highly stressful life event to experience.

- Jack found transitioning back into the community difficult as he felt there was no real support as no one could visit with him and he found talking online difficult. Jack preferred to speak to people face-to-face, however he understood that he had to adhere to the Government's guidelines. He explained that he always had someone to talk to whilst in care and always had his needs met. Jack now attends the online cooking and eating well programme and takes part in the online quizzes and self-care nights. He checks in with the team on a weekly basis and enjoys the support he receives.
- Doris is currently transitioning out of residential care to live independently in the community. Doris is finding the transition period overwhelming as she cannot move to her local authority due to COVID-19 restrictions. Doris thinks that there is not enough support for her in the community, and she is afraid that she will fail. Doris required transitions support to find out what services are available to her in the community and how much benefits she will receive and says that support has always been put in place whilst she has been in care and now that she is leaving, she feels she has no one to help her move on. Doris continues to engage with the project manager and keeps in contact on a weekly basis.
- Ben is transitioning from a residential care house to live independently in the community. He was referred by his key worker at a skills academy he was working in. His transitioning period has been pushed to a later date due to COVID-19. He requested transitions support as he did not know what was happening with his leaving date. He was also anxious about finances and employment. Ben was referred to the team who contacted him via telephone where they discussed his support needs. The

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advisor supported Ben to understand his current circumstances and what the current restrictions meant to him. Ben also looked at college courses available to him and would get back in touch if he needed support to complete applications. The team check in with Ben on a weekly basis and update him on current restrictions. Ben will continue to be supported in his residential placement until the travel between local authorities is authorised.

- Kay also took support from the team. Kay was preparing to transition into the community, however that has been put on hold due to current lockdown measures. Kay has found the changes difficult as she cannot visit home due to travel restrictions and COVID-19 guidelines. She was visiting her hometown every weekend and preparing for transition. The team supported her to find college courses online and complete applications. She has applied to a hair and beauty course at a local college.

The emotional and social impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing

In addition to the travel restrictions causing delays and disruption to young peoples’ transitions many young people also stated that the restrictions in place have had a negative effect upon their social and emotional wellbeing. Indeed, 51% of participants specifically requested support with social isolation, while 70% of participants requested at least one form of social support from the range available. To combat social isolation and negative emotions stemming from this, a range of virtual and individual activities aimed at reducing social isolation such as a baking competition, cooking and eating well programme, social nights, self-care evenings, socially distanced walks, fitness and reading groups etc are available to young people. Where additional resources are required to take part, these are delivered to the young person to ensure they can participate fully. Some exemplar comments are provided below to highlight these areas of common experience.

- Sammy requested support with social isolation - although Sammy enjoys living independently, she would like to meet some young people like herself online to combat social isolation. Sammy stated she would like to take part in the self-care and social evenings; however, she did not need support in any other areas of her life as she felt her life was positive now. Sammy engages well with self-care evenings; however, remains very independent and declines any offer of support in other areas.
- Ruth stated that she liked living independently, however, disclosed that she was feeling alone and would like to take part in the socially distanced activities and now takes part in the self-care and social nights online, as well as the cooking and eating well programme. Ruth now keeps in touch with the group via Facebook, offers ideas

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for online activities and engages well in chats with a befriender online as they cannot meet up due to lockdown measures.

Some participants reflected on social isolation further giving more specific details about how isolation was affecting their emotional and social wellbeing. For example, many specifically mentioned that a lack of contact with family and friends had brought on negative feelings such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

- Rebecca has been care-experienced most of her life and now lives independently in the community. Rebecca was worried about herself as she felt she was socially isolated away from friends and family throughout the COVID-19 crisis. She has lived on her own for just under a year and feels overwhelmed by being at home all the time with nothing to do. She states that she is bored, and this can cause anxiety and low mood. Rebecca wanted to take part in the project in the hope of meeting other people and participate in the online activities to curb her declining frame of mind. She joined the project’s Facebook page and signed up for the activities online programme. She takes part in the self-care and the cooking and eating well nights. Rebecca also speaks with a wellbeing practitioner weekly and enjoys their one-to-one meetings.
- Anna enjoys living independently but sometimes finds it difficult. She suffers from social isolation as she used to visit her sister and her nieces daily, however now she cannot do this as her sister is shielding. She misses her family and finds the days very long. She also has a sick family member who lives in another authority who she is not allowed to visit. Anna also received support with digital and broadband access to help with social isolation, keeping in touch with family members and the project team as financially this was challenging for Anna. Anna was added to the project’s Facebook page and started attending the online cooking tutorials to combat isolation. She receives a weekly recipe box and takes part in the self-care evenings.

The psychological impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing

At times, the challenges with social isolation and the recent restrictions were found to negatively impact upon the psychological wellbeing of young people by exacerbating pre-existing symptoms related to psychological health and wellbeing.

- Ava moved from her own local authority to another one to move on from the life that she was living and is learning to live independently in the community. Ava had started to use drugs and wanted a fresh start in a new community where she could help herself to get better. Ava believed if she could change her group of friends and

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her environment then there would have a better chance of recovery. Ava was living in a new community, she felt she had no friends and no one she could really speak to. Due to COVID-19, many of the services were closed so Ava decided to move back to her home local authority as she could not travel between authorities and she missed her family and friends. Although Ava had been engaged with the counselling and the befriender service, she disengaged from the project upon moving home. The project advisors keep in contact with Ava and have signposted her to services within her own local authority.

- Rita disclosed that she was feeling alone and that her mental health was suffering due to social isolation and she would like to join in with online activities including the self-care and cooking nights and would like a befriender to check-in with her on a weekly basis. In addition, Rita also requested mental health counselling support which she attends on a weekly basis. Rita sometimes does not engage due to depression and has arranged a few socially distanced walks with her befriender, however she has never turned up. Rita now has a befriender online due to current lockdown measures.

The recent restrictions appear to have had severe effects on the psychological wellbeing of young people due to the presence of unforeseen and unprecedented novel psychological stressors. Exemplar comments below evidence the impact isolation had upon the mental health of some young people engaged in Project Connect-19.

- Ronnie disclosed that his mental health was suffering due to a lack of contact with friends and family as he had to shield due to poor health. Ronnie was added to the online programme where he could talk to others and take part in socially distanced activities with other young people including fitness, cooking workshops and the reading group. Ronnie speaks weekly to the project’s staff and keeps in contact daily through the project Facebook page. Ronnie was also referred to mental health counselling and receives weekly sessions which he enjoys. He has arranged some socially distanced activities with a project befriender, however that has been put on hold due to new lockdown measures. This will resume if the rules change.
- Elliott explained that he was feeling scared at the prospect of living on his own and having to deal with bills etc. He was concerned about how he would survive without support. Elliot felt that the structure in real life did not offer much support, but he was looking forward to becoming more independent. Elliott believes that the weekly counselling sessions help him a lot as he can speak about that the issues that cause

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him anxiety. He has virtual meetings with his counsellor, and he likes the online interaction.

Some young people also disclosed that despite seeking mental health support from elsewhere, they had been unable to gain any professional support either due to current restrictions disrupting services but also due to long standing access issues such as long waiting lists that had been evident prior to the pandemic.

- Lauren has been living independently with her partner and child in the community for one year. Lauren disclosed that she has been referred to a counsellor by her GP, however that has now been over a year and Lauren remains on a waiting list. Lauren finds life difficult with a young child and feels overwhelmed at times but now engages well with counselling sessions. Lauren has been offered further support in other areas; however, she has declined this offer.
- Dom was referred to the project by his social worker for mental health counselling. Dom did not want to disclose any private information regarding his life in general. He has been on waiting lists for counselling for 18 months and still has not received an appointment. Dom was referred to a counsellor on the project and receives weekly counselling sessions. Dom’s counsellor has explained more to him about the project, and he would like to take part in the online activities. He has joined the Facebook page and receives weekly recipe boxes to take part in the online cooking and eating well programme. Dom remains very quiet; however, he engages in the project when he needs support.
- Benny stated he would like counselling as none of his usual support was in place due to COVID-19 and no one could come into his house. He found this very frustrating as he used to have a support worker who would take him for his shopping and help him to keep his house in order. Benny did not like going out into the community on his own as he was not confident enough and it makes him anxious. He said that he was socially isolated and had no one to speak to. He felt very alone and uncertain about the world. Benny felt scared sometimes because all his support structures had been withdrawn. Benny stated he does not get enough support in the community and feels abandoned as there are no services or support put in place throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that he is left alone to survive without anyone to help him. After much discussion Benny agreed to talk with a counsellor online and discuss how he was feeling. Benny receives recipe and self-care boxes. He attends the online activities and enjoys speaking with other people who have been affected in the same way.

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Although many young people found the counselling service to be valuable and of use to them, in contrast, some young people also indicated a discomfort with the use of a counselling service, often in such cases stating that they found counselling too difficult at the current time and opted instead to make use of a befriender service, other participants preferred not to engage in either of these forms of social support.

- Sonya has been finding life difficult throughout lockdown and does not really like speaking to a lot of people. Sonya disclosed that she was feeling very lonely during lockdown and living by herself was difficult. She was suffering from anxiety and felt bad when she left the house to buy shopping. She would like someone to talk to now and again but only if she can stay in control of the timing. Sonya was also referred to the befriender service, however she has not engaged in the socially distanced or online activities.
- Abigail said that she found life difficult now as she could not visit friends and family. She was very anxious about any of her family catching COVID-19. Abigail was interested in joining the online activities to curb her loneliness. She was referred for online mental health counselling, transitions support, befriending/volunteer services and set up to join the online programmes. She attended one session of counselling and found that she did not want to carry on as it was too difficult and made her angry. She continues to engage online for cooking and baking tutorials and receives weekly recipe boxes. She also received a self-care box which will help with her anxiety.
- Kay has found the changes difficult as she cannot visit home due to travel restrictions and COVID-19 guidelines. She was visiting her hometown every weekend and preparing for the transition. Kay requested support to connect socially with other young people on the programme through Facebook and online activities. This would help combat social isolation. Kay ticked mental health/counselling, however she changed her mind and decided that she did not like online counselling. She receives self-care boxes and takes part in the online self-care nights. Kay also has a peer mentor who checks in with her on a weekly basis.
- Anton was referred to the mental health counselling services and the befriending service. He met up with the befriender on several occasions and went for socially distanced walks. Anton stopped engaging with the counselling services as he feels that this option was not culturally suitable for him although he also stated he did not always want to talk with people.

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The practical impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing

The team were often asked to help participants manage and adapt to changes in their lives due to COVID-19 restrictions. These changes frequently had an impact upon a young person's ability to maintain independence, for example, impacting upon their education/training, employment, finances, and tenancy. The team were available throughout the project to provide guidance as to the options open to young people and support them to make progress towards their goals. Participants were often signposted to other services, supported to construct personal budgets, supported in communication with other organisations or to complete applications. Support with these issues were often supported through virtual meetings with the project manager.

The findings show evidence of travel and distancing restrictions having cost young people employment opportunities therefore impacting on both life opportunities and young people's ability to financially sustain independent living.

- Doris had employment lined up to start working when she transitioned to independent living however this has also been cancelled due to the closure of shops. Doris requested help to find a new job from the project. Doris had been unaware that a care experienced bursary was available to her to help support her to return to education. Once Doris knew what the care experienced bursary was, she was more interested in finding a course to apply to and the project manager then supported Doris to complete applications to several courses as well as helping Doris to find part-time work, however she felt that she did not want to work in retail or a supermarket as she was afraid to catch COVID-19. Doris awaits news of her college applications and new transition date.
- Elliot was also referred for transitions support where they explored college courses he could apply to and looked at jobs that he would be interested in. Elliot keeps in touch with the project manager and together they look at different job sites and what would be best for him during lockdown measures. Elliot feels that the pandemic has limited his progress in achieving any goals this year. This leaves him feeling anxious and depressed. Elliot will continue to take support from the project whilst it continues.
- One of the most common challenges for care experienced young people included the closure and disruption to education/training programmes with many young people having to adapt to online learning and self-teaching to an extent to sustain progress with their studies.

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- Sally was finding university life difficult due to classes being moved online. She was staying near to the university to make travel easier and now she cannot travel home to see family and friends due to travel restrictions. The team spoke with Sally via telephone and explored areas of support. Sally was referred to student services to find out information regarding online classes and support put in place for students. The project manager also supported her to contact her landlord regarding a rent holiday until things returned to normal. In addition, Sally wanted to look for part-time jobs in the area that would supplement her bursary. Sally was sent some job applications for essential shops which she completed and filled in.
- Johnny finds the lockdown restrictions difficult as he cannot meet up with family and friends and his college course has been moved to online. He does not like the online classes and finds himself disengaging. He would like more people to talk to and would like to try some of the online activities such as cooking and self-care nights. A project advisor contacted Johnny via telephone to discuss his present circumstances and support needs. He disclosed that he cannot always afford telephone top ups, therefore he might not be able to take part in the online activities. He now receives a monthly top up voucher to speak with the team and join online activities. Johnny was matched to a befriender who had hobbies in common. The befriender contacts him on a weekly basis to catch up and offer a friendly voice. Johnny takes part in the online self-care nights and receives a weekly box to join the group.

Many young people also found the closure of college and university campuses impacted further upon their mental wellbeing and feelings of isolation.

- Anton is living independently in the community with his older brother and originates out with the UK. Their parents have been sent back to their home country and Anton is in full-time education and receives support from social work and throughcare teams. Anton explained that he was feeling alone and depressed due to his personal circumstances and that he was finding life difficult due to the college being closed due to COVID-19. Anton felt low because he was in the house all day and doing college work from his computer. He misses the social interaction with other students and feels he has nothing to do in the evenings. Anton disclosed that he would like to take part in the online activities, however he never had enough data in his mobile to take part. Anton's befriender arranged a monthly top up voucher and access to the Facebook page where he could take part in the online activities such as cooking, baking and quiz nights. Anton also had recipe boxes and self-care boxes delivered to his home address.

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The physical impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing

Many participants were also concerned about their physical wellbeing with concerns about food availability, lack of exercise and fears of becoming infected with COVID-19.

- Rose said sometimes she did not have a lot of money left over after paying bills which led her to eat cheap, unhealthy foods a lot of the time. She felt that she could not talk to people about this as she was embarrassed. Rose was referred to the Facebook online activities programme where she now takes part in the self-care nights, she also takes part in the cooking and eating well programme and receives weekly recipe boxes.
- Dan was contacted by telephone by a project team member. He said he was interested in sports and boxing; however, he had no equipment. He also felt that he would benefit from counselling as he was finding living independently difficult. Dan was suffering from social isolation due to COVID-19, he had to self-isolate and could not meet up with friends or family. The team offered to add Dan to the online activities, however he did not want to do group activities as he was shy and found talking to others difficult. Dan was referred to mental health counselling online, however he did not like online counselling as he preferred face-to-face. He showed up a few times and then disengaged with the counsellor. The counsellor tried to contact him on several occasions, however he would not answer his telephone. Dan said if he required further support, he would get in touch with the Connect-19 team.

The financial impact of restrictions on personal wellbeing

Many participants reported that their financial status has been negatively affected by the current COVID-19 restrictions leaving them struggling with bills/debt or unable to fund essentials such as food costs, energy costs, data costs and self-care products. When it was required to enable participants to take part in project activities, they were provided with products inclusive of mobile devices and top-up vouchers. In addition, to ensure young people could engage with the online activities they were issued with self-care boxes, recipe ingredient and reading materials to allow young people to engage in meaningful activity socially, educationally, and professionally within the online community without a financial burden attached while current restrictions prevent real world contact.

- Ruth said she could not take part in the online activities as she did not have enough data or funds to cover that amount of time online. Ruth receives a monthly top up voucher so that she can take part with all online activities. Ruth engaged in the cooking and eating well programme, self-care and reading groups with the project team providing

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recipe and self-care boxes to not only support Ruth to take part in activities but also then enable Ruth to prioritise her own funds elsewhere.

- Jack said living in the community was difficult and he did not have enough money to keep his house heated and he did not know who to speak to about that. He also did not know which services were available to him as he had never lived on his own. After speaking with a project advisor, Jack decided that he needed transitions support to find out what benefits and services he was entitled to. The project manager supported Jack to get in touch with his local benefits office and his local council offices to find out if he was entitled to further support and he received a charging pack for his phone. This was in case his electricity ran out and he could not charge his phone.
- After much discussion Taylor was signposted to a job centre representative who would match his skills to a job and support him to find work. Taylor was also unsure of the benefits he would receive as he said he would need housing support to pay rent. The project manager supported him to call his local council office and find out what bills he would be responsible for. Taylor is entitled to full housing benefit whilst he is unemployed, however that would change if he were to work over 16 hours per week. He is also responsible for paying a small amount of council tax whether he is on benefits or not. Taylor checks in every week with the project for job updates and engages well with transitions support. He has also been signposted to a local advocacy service.

In addition, finances impacted upon a participant’s access to the internet and therefore many vital services and the ability to complete essential tasks. Many participants who did have access to a device sometimes did not have enough data/credit or funds to acquire data. In many cases this resulted in further social isolation with participants commenting on their increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation being worsened not only by the physical COVID-19 restrictions preventing them from visiting others but also due to having no means to stay in touch with others, such as friends, families, and services remotely. See below examples from case notes of instances when the theme of digital access was a barrier to social engagement.

- Taylor requested transition support and digital/broadband support to take part in activities as he did not have any access to broadband. His transition has been put on hold due to COVID-19 which he finds frustrating. He said he was ready to live on his own and look for a job. After speaking with a project advisor, Taylor was set up with a monthly top up card for data. This enabled him to engage in the project and receive transition support.

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- Peter enjoys being independent, however he finds it difficult not being allowed to meet up with friends. This leaves him feeling socially isolated and depressed. Peter has no way to keep in touch with family or friends as he has no mobile telephone or broadband. He would like to take part in the projects online activities and finds having no internet access serves as a barrier. He was given a mobile phone and monthly top up voucher. He accesses the online activities such as cooking and self-care nights. He receives weekly recipe boxes with ingredients and self-care boxes. Peter likes engaging with the online activities and he states that the project helps combat social isolation.
- Nancy's transition has been put on hold due to the current COVID-19 restrictions. This has impacted her mental health and wellbeing as she was prepared to move into her own tenancy. Nancy disclosed that she was suffering from social isolation as she could not go home to her own local authority and spend time with her family and friends. Nancy requested digital support and socially distanced activities such as self-care evenings. Nancy disclosed that she has a barrier to connecting with the project as she did not have a mobile telephone or access to the internet. Nancy was referred to the activities co-ordinator who set her up with a budget telephone and monthly top up vouchers for access to online activities. The socially distanced activities were put on hold due to travel restrictions and volunteers unable to take part. Nancy engages well with the online activities.
- Rita said she could not take part in the online activities as she did not have enough data to cover that amount of time online. Rita receives a monthly top up voucher so that she can take part with all online activities and attend counselling sessions.
- Elliot did not have a mobile phone or data which was causing him to feel sad as he could not keep in contact with his friends. Elliot was given a budget mobile telephone and a monthly top up voucher so that he could connect with his mental health counsellor on a weekly basis as well as receive transitions advice from the project.

In some cases, young people who were struggling were unaware of funds they were entitled to or required support to setup access to such funds, young people were also often signposted to a benefits advisor and/or financial advisor based upon their circumstances.

- Cameron said that he was not good with money and spent his money before paying his bills. He got support and advice from the project regarding spending and the importance of paying bills. The team helped him set up a monthly payment spreadsheet which he could follow and keep an eye on his spending.

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- Ruth has been living independently in the community for a year and required support to financially maintain successful independent living. Ruth said she liked living independently, however it was difficult to manage her money and she had got herself into debt with the cost of living increasing due to lockdown. Ruth was signposted to a debt management service online, the advisor also created spreadsheets for monthly outgoings which Ruth has found very helpful in the management of her money.

8 Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analysis supports the conclusion that young care leavers are currently being affected negatively by the COVID-19 related restrictions. Indeed, findings show a varied type and level of need for support within and throughout the Connect-19 project and care experienced-community. It was found that the type of support requested varied among the group with participants on average requesting support in 3.58 of the 10 listed areas. There was much variation in need with all areas of support offered being requested by at least 9 young people however the most frequently requested type of support was in digital services and broadband followed by support with social isolation.

When comparing the quantitative and qualitative findings while more participants requested support with digital services and broadband the reasoning behind these requests were more varied than requests for support with social isolation, therefore suggesting this was the most common need among participants.

The main commonality being that lack of digital access was a barrier to access or success in other key areas. For example, participants reported a need to access additional support such as virtual meetings and mental health counselling services as well as a need for access to online educational resources and job searching websites. In addition, many participants requested digital services support to help maintain social connections and prevent isolation. Similarly, case notes regarding requests for support during virtual meetings were found to have mixed associations with the other areas of support for example, support with virtual meetings being related to transitions services, mental health counselling and social inclusion for example, finding mothers groups who meet virtually as alternative to local face-to-face meetings while restrictions prevent this.

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Considering, the variation among need for digital services and internet access it was found that social isolation was by far the most common challenge experienced by young people involved in the project. Where digital access was found to be a barrier to success and wellbeing, social isolation was in contrast found to be at the core of a multitude of needs.

The travel and contact restrictions related to COVID-19 meant that participants were unable to visit with friends or family which some participants described as a novel cause of loneliness and isolation while others stated that the restrictions worsened isolation they already felt.

Participants reported a lack of access to services with some services moving to an online only environment not suiting the needs of young people and some services being unavailable. For example, the closure of job centres and other council services left young people lacking guidance and advice which would usually be available and relied upon. This need was met during the project as the transitions' advisor was able to provide guidance, assistance and signposting where required to ensure that all support available to young people was provided. This often-included support in the form of assisting with benefits and bursary applications as well as college and job applications and signposting to foodbanks among other services.

The project volunteer supported the befriending/mentoring service. They were matched carefully with young people and were able to engage in various activities alongside their befriender. The activities varied depending on the restrictions in place at the time meaning that some activities were cancelled/re-scheduled however a programme of online events ensured a range of opportunities for social engagement were available to young people throughout the project.

The use of the Connect-19 community Facebook group offered a central point of contact for participants which resulted in high engagement from young people who took initiative in building a supportive social network of peers during the project. Participants suggested and worked towards creating and delivering events such as quiz nights with the project leaving behind a legacy of young people potentially forming lasting friendships with peers which may prevent future isolation. Young people often shared relevant knowledge with each other and provided emotional support to one another within the Facebook group with many participants providing feedback suggesting they would prefer the project to continue. This suggests that future transitions services/projects would benefit from a similar programme of social activities to support successful transitions by giving young

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people community building opportunities. Many participants stated that the restrictions and resulting isolation also had a negative effect upon their mental health. Social isolation was found to have influenced the mental wellbeing of young people who often reported feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety as being linked to or worsened by the restrictions in place. In addition, a scarcity of mental health services was available to young people out-with the Connect-19 project with some participants reporting long waits for counselling following referrals.

In addition, participants reported a lack of ability to attend employment or educational institutions caused feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness described in terms of having nothing to do or goals to aim for. The importance of support around education and employment is highlighted by the rate of employment of care experienced young people with 66% of care leavers in the UK employed by age 30 compared to 82% of their non-care experienced peers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cameron et al. 2018). This high rate of employment despite the challenges care leavers face suggests higher rates of employment may be achieved if additional support is invested into young care leavers to support their transition into independent living and adulthood with new responsibilities and challenges which their non-care experienced peers may not face. This is particularly important as care experienced people are also found to be more likely than their non-care-experienced peers to experience poorer outcomes such as homelessness and imprisonment (Scottish Prison Service, 2016, Prisoner’s Survey 2015 – Young People in Custody. Scottish Government, 2018, Homelessness in Scotland: 2017-18). With the addition of novel concerns related to the COVID-19 outbreak and future risks of regional or national restrictions it is suggested that future transitions services should look to be flexible in areas of service expansion and diversification to support young people with novel challenges during transitions from care.

This suggests that future transitions programmes should consider the inclusion of mental health resources such as counselling complimented by befriending/mentoring and self-care programmes. Some participants disengaged from the counselling service explained that they did not feel emotionally ready or did not find this useful but preferred to engage with the befriending/mentoring service instead. Participants who did not choose to continue counselling also at times stated a preference for privacy or that exploring their emotions was too difficult currently. This suggests that future mental health provisions for young care leavers should provide flexible support available as and when young people require the service. In addition, all participants involved in the befriending/peer-mentoring reposted positive experiences with the service suggesting that the permanent

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availability of such a service would have a positive impact on the successful transitions of young people.

As has been alluded to with the high uptake in digital services and internet supports due to financial pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic has been observed to have had a financial impact upon young care leavers with employment options being restricted and more time spent at home and online causing increased expense and financial pressure. Participants mentioned increased heating and electricity bills, an inability to afford online access and at times an inability to afford the appropriate nutrition and self-care products. The project assisted young people to maintain wellbeing by relieving the financial burden on young people in part through the provision of products for weekly guided cooking and eating well sessions, self-care evenings and provision of other material such as books for the reading group. In addition, the regular practice of these wellbeing activities aimed to both develop young people's skills related to independent living and to facilitate the practice of positive behaviours related to wellbeing such as eating well, self-care and exercising.

Throughout the project young people were supported to overcome the barriers to success that they may face, which are novel issues in transition planning as well as providing an enhanced level of transitions support that is not previously or permanently available to young care leavers inclusive of flexible and responsive mental health counselling services, social supports such as the befriending/mentoring service, the online Connect-19 community Facebook page, mental wellbeing and addressing social isolation. The project also enabled Kibble to widen its role in supporting those at risk of poor outcomes with the Facebook advertising campaign and referrals taken from known services assisting in the fast recruitment of the target number of 50 participants, while this enabled the swift progress of the project it also suggests the level of need may be greater with more young people potentially lacking in support.

Project Connect-19 aims to deliver support in areas where young people are disproportionately affected by the pandemic and facing novel challenges due to the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. The project takes a flexible participant-led approach to the provision of transitions support and social supports which allows for the programme to be individually tailored to each young person, for example, some young people engaged only at key times when assistance was required while others engaged daily. As shown by the findings and testimonials participants who sought support saw an increase in their ability to manage key areas of living independently. Case notes revealed that social isolation impacted negatively upon young people's wellbeing. The ability to

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successfully transition or maintain independence through direct support from the newly founded Project Connect-19 team was a core theme relevant to all participants while access to funds for digital services, everyday living expenses and additional expenses associated with lockdowns were found to be barriers to success that once removed allowed young people to engage and progress.

To conclude, the insights gained from the Project Connect-19 evaluation suggests that a flexible and participant-led 'transitions plus' service, such as Connect-19, would be beneficial to young care leavers during and following transitions from care. Evidence of challenges unique to the care experienced community such as postponed transition planning and living independently at a younger age than non-care experienced peers suggests that a service directed towards care leavers specifically to address the unique and specific needs of the care experienced community would be of benefit.

9 References

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10 Appendices

Appendix A: Projects digital recruitment leaflet



Project Connect-19

Project Connect-19 supports care experienced young people preparing for/recently transitioned to independent living, that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, we offer support in Glasgow; Renfrewshire; East Renfrewshire; North, South and East Ayrshire; and East and West Dunbartonshire. We aim to address social isolation and support mental well-being through project activities.

How Can We Help?

- 1:1 & group mental health support offered by qualified counsellors virtually and in person
- A programme of activities aimed at social isolation such as baking, cooking, fitness, social nights, self-care evenings, socially distanced walks etc. (All ingredients for cooking nights supplied)
- Online sessions focussing on lockdown rules, keeping safe online, general well-being followed by Q&A sessions
- Transitions support in the areas of: housing and welfare, benefits entitlement, debt management, legal issues, further education and more
- Regular video group calls to offer support and provide opportunities for young people to safely network with each other
- Volunteer befriending service

To make an enquiry please call Sandra Guiney on 07773 176 728 or email sandra.guiney@kibble.org

Getting Online

To ensure everyone can enjoy the activities safely, many will be delivered online. For help to access activities, please contact the team.

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COMMUNITY FUND

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Appendix B: Example of Accessible Image Based Recipe Demonstrations (images taken from video tutorial).



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