

Aberlour Response to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee Inquiry:  
Vulnerable Children During the Coronavirus Outbreak

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## Introduction

Aberlour works with vulnerable children, young people and families throughout Scotland, providing services and support in over forty locations around the country across a range of settings. We help to overcome significant challenges, like growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, the impact of drugs and alcohol on family life, living with a disability or the impact of poverty and financial hardship. We aim to provide help and support at the earliest opportunity to prevent problems becoming intractable or spiralling out of control.

In Scotland, all organisations who work with and support vulnerable children, young people and families are having to respond to unprecedented challenges in how they provide that support, as we react to the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of the Third Sector has been crucial in responding to coronavirus, working alongside the Scottish Government, local authorities and other public services, supporting vulnerable children, young people and families in our communities, to keep them safe and ensure they get the help they need<sup>1</sup>. That joined up and collective approach has never been needed more than at this time of national crisis.

At Aberlour, we have had to come to terms with working in fundamentally new and different ways to continue to provide the vital support that children, young people and families need, in whatever way we can. In doing so, our clear focus is: to promote children and young people's wellbeing and to keep them safe; to keep families connected to our services; and to alleviate the impact of poverty and financial hardship.

## Responding to COVID-19

We are seeing first-hand the profound impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on families we work with, many already in the grip of poverty, and we are encountering extraordinary challenges making sure children, young people and families continue to get the practical, emotional and financial support they badly need. Continuing to deliver services which meet the needs of children, young people and families has meant having to radically change and adapt how we deliver support, as well as how we communicate and maintain contact and connections with those we work with. Our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-vulnerable-children-young-people-data-intelligence-report/>

services and staff have displayed incredible resilience and determination to ensure that vital support, a lifeline for many, remains available to families at a time when it is needed most<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, we have ensured that every single one of our services across the country remains open and continues to provide help and support and to be there for the children, young people and families we support.

We have taken steps to ensure continuity in our front-line family support services across the country, so they can continue to work with families by sustaining and increasing our essential family support worker capacity at this critical time, against a backdrop of rising need and increased demand for our services. These services normally support thousands of families across Scotland, providing help and support in response to: childhood adversity; poverty, worklessness and low-incomes; poor mental health; substance misuse; domestic abuse; parental disability/learning difficulties; and poor educational attainment. Whilst these needs continue to require support during this crisis, many more families are now presenting to our services as a result of experiencing issues exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. We have also increased the direct financial support we can provide to struggling families by adding to and raising funds for our own Urgent Assistance Fund<sup>3</sup> to provide basic and essential items for families who otherwise cannot afford them.

Concerningly, we are now seeing a rise in child protection and child wellbeing concerns, domestic abuse reporting, mental health issues, as well as more and more families pushed into poverty. Many already vulnerable children, young people and families are also needing a range of additional supports to counter the worst effects and the consequential strain on family relationships, stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the rising level of need we have seen during this crisis and the demand for support for families who have been affected in one way or another by coronavirus, we anticipate the numbers of children, young people and families accessing our family support services will continue to rise steeply as a result of current circumstances.

In responding to this call for evidence we have chosen to address the thematic areas outlined by the Committee, as well as highlight other areas which we believe are relevant to the Committee's inquiry.

### Free School Meals / Food Provision

With 1 in 4 children in Scotland already living in poverty<sup>4</sup> the impact of coronavirus will only exacerbate child poverty further. We have seen thousands of children and their families across Scotland either falling into poverty or being pushed further into poverty, as a result of coronavirus. Families already at breaking point are struggling and across the country many more families than usual are presenting to our services or requesting help due to financial pressures. In addition to the thousands of families we normally work with experiencing financial hardship, we have seen a rise in demand for support from families where one or both parents had been previously working and are now awaiting their first Universal Credit payment, with no income for up to six weeks. Consequently,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/our-response-to-covid-19/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/service-category/urgent-assistance-fund/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-income-inequality-scotland-2016-19/pages/1/>

there has been an overwhelming demand for food packages, basic shopping and cooked meals for families across our services.

Our family support services have been working alongside a wide range of community partners helping to purchase and deliver food packages, hot meals, food vouchers, electricity cards and other essential items to families. Youth workers who would normally deliver detached street work and be supporting young people in the community, are now delivering food packages and basic items to families. In the time since social distancing measures have been implemented, we have supported more than 3000 additional children, young people and parents previously unknown to our services with food parcels and hot meals.

Reduced household budgets for thousands of families we work with across Scotland have made the provision of food for them and their children a daily challenge. Across our services we have had to support families with food provision in a variety of ways. Many families are in need of cooked meals as they are struggling to afford the increased costs of household utilities caused by all family members remaining at home all day during lockdown, and therefore cannot afford to cook at home. A significant number of families cannot get to shops to purchase food, either as a result of shielding themselves or their children, because they have caring responsibilities for multiple children or because they cannot afford both the cost of travel to the supermarket and also to pay for shopping. Supermarket home delivery options are inconsistent or unavailable in many areas, and so without help and support to buy food some families simply would be unable to provide meals for their children. For families with children with disabilities or additional support needs, panic buying has meant that some foods are hard to find for children with special diets.

We are seeing a number of barriers and issues for many families in providing meals for their children, even when they are in receipt of food packages. Many families don't have the facilities to store fresh food for longer than a couple of days. Others don't have the basic utensils or facilities to cook fresh meals. Many more families simply don't know how to cook. Our services have been supporting families with accessible and helpful resources online and on social media, such as simple, healthy recipes and menus and virtual cooking groups. However, not all families have access to digital technology and many are reliant on direct support with meal preparation and food provision for their children. In the current circumstances, there are limitations to the help and support that can be provided directly to families who cannot afford food and do not know how to cook, and therefore the provision of cooked meals for those families is vital.

Through our Urgent Assistance Fund, we provide cash grants to help either families with children or to young people under 21 who are suffering extreme financial hardship, including as a result of the impact of the COVID-19. 100% of the money raised by Aberlour for the Fund goes directly to those who benefit from the Fund. These grants help and assist with a range of basic needs, such as food, prepay power cards, children's clothing, bedding or other essentials. Although the Fund predates the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the unprecedented impact of coronavirus on jobs and families' circumstances, most of the applications we have received since March of this year are directly related to the impact of this crisis. We have seen the number of applications to the Fund increase by more than 1400% in that time. Since the lockdown measures have been in place more than 90% of applications to the Fund have requested assistance with the provision of food, and has included

requests for money to supply cookers, microwaves and other white goods for storing food. This is in addition to the food packages and support with meals that has been provided directly to families by our services.

### Additional Support Needs

For children and young people with disabilities or additional support needs, and their families, the impact of coronavirus on routines and accessibility of support has caused significant disruption, anxiety and stress. For many of those children, young people and families that we work with this has meant interruption to the care and support we would normally provide, with our day care support for children with disabilities suspended for the time being. Many families are shielding and cannot access our services, and others have chosen not to use our reduced short breaks services as a result of their children having underlying health conditions. Many families are experiencing new social and emotional challenges in lockdown as a result of having reduced access to the support they would normally receive. Families we support with children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are particularly struggling with lockdown and the consequential impact on behaviour, as a result of disruption to routines and increased family stress. Knowing that local authority resources have been stretched for some time, many families are also anxious about what support they will be able to access in the future and have expressed concern about what levels of support will be available to them after lockdown.

The impact on children and young people's education has been felt differently in different areas. Our disability services around the country are reporting that accessibility to school hubs for children and young people with complex additional support needs is inconsistent. Guidance from EIS<sup>5</sup> highlights the steps that local authorities have been encouraged to take to ensure continued provision through local hubs for vulnerable children and young people, including those with complex additional support needs. However, we are seeing a varied picture nationally for children and young people with disabilities, with enhanced provisions in some areas open full time, limited provision in some areas of only two hours per week, and no accessibility at all in other areas. Some families we work with are using direct payments to continue to access support in private settings, although at significantly reduced levels. Reportedly, some children who are accessing such support are receiving less than half the support they would normally.

In our own disability services, we are supporting families with children with disabilities and complex additional support needs in whatever ways we can, working closely with local authorities to ensure families' needs are reviewed regularly and short breaks are offered to those most in need. Some families we work with are choosing not to access enhanced provisions at local school hubs but are still using our short breaks services, which are offering support for one child or young person, or two siblings, at a time. We have developed a priority list for families who would most benefit from our short breaks services, and have offered places where planned breaks have been cancelled and there is now availability. We have introduced intensive infection control measures in order to protect and reassure families who are still accessing our short breaks services. Continuing to provide short break

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eis.org.uk/Coronavirus/ASNAdvice>

services has been hugely welcome and beneficial for many families who are experiencing incredible additional stress at this time.

In addition, we are maintaining regular contact with families and responding to any requests for help and support, and where we cannot provide support we are working closely with partner organisations in order to signpost to other local services. Our teams are also carrying out weekly family welfare checks for some families most in need to identify how families can be best supported in the current circumstances. Regular contact is being maintained with all families at least fortnightly. This has included providing grocery and shopping services and collecting prescriptions for families unable to leave the house. Working alongside local social work teams, we have been sharing relevant information to highlight families with children with disabilities who are struggling and to get them additional support if required.

### Child Protection and Looked After Children

For families where child protection is a concern, maintaining contact and communication, continuing to provide support and ensuring services have sight of children to make sure they are safe is paramount. Lack of direct contact with families has presented challenges in how we assess children's wellbeing or identify welfare concerns for children who may otherwise have had regular contact with services and workers. Lack of contact also introduces the risk of disguised compliance where concerns are masked by parents and can be difficult for practitioners to determine remotely, particularly where contact is through digital communication and video conferencing. We are seeing child protection concerns emerging in familiar households and with families we already support, where existing issues are being compounded by the current crisis, as well as a worrying rise in child wellbeing and child protection concerns more generally. In many circumstances these concerns are directly linked to financial pressures families are experiencing. Requests for financial help and support through our Urgent Assistance Fund are frequently identifying child wellbeing and child protection concerns.

The absence of professional support networks for families upon which they would normally rely, such as family support centres, parent and toddler groups and parenting classes, has been detrimental for particularly vulnerable families. Young single parents we work with, many already socially isolated, are struggling with self-isolating and some are ignoring social distancing measures as a result, putting them and their children at risk. Parents with learning disabilities are another vulnerable group who are experiencing a range of additional challenges during lockdown, with many struggling to understand guidance on social distancing or self-isolation. Many of these parents are also experiencing increased anxiety without both the dedicated support they would normally receive, and also the additional community supports and connections they rely on. Where there is already an increased risk of child protection concerns due to the level of vulnerability of some parents, the inability to access regular formal and informal support networks, often including well established routines and positive personal relationships, has heightened risks to their children's welfare. We are concerned that there are likely significant numbers of child protection concerns around the country which will only become apparent in the weeks and months ahead as we move out of lockdown, and that many child wellbeing and welfare issues will remain hidden for as long as families do not have regular, direct contact with services or are able to access support.

This crisis has seen a reported rise in domestic abuse reporting, and our family support services have seen an increase in referrals to services where domestic abuse is identified as a risk factor. In responding to this rise in referrals, our dedicated domestic abuse team in Glasgow has had to develop ways of remotely supporting the non-abusing parent and their children in the most challenging of circumstances. The impact of this can be significant and stressful on staff, as they support families on the phone continuously with little relief between calls. Around 70% of applications to our Urgent Assistance Fund have identified domestic abuse as an issue for families requesting financial assistance. Our domestic abuse team works with non-abusing partners and their children who are still living in the home they share with their abusers, which is distinct from other domestic abuse support organisations who do not support in these circumstances. Currently our team are offering remote support on the phone or via video conferencing for families supported by the service, as well as risk assessed home visits for the most vulnerable families. Due to the current restrictions, however, the support we can provide to families affected by domestic abuse is limited and will not be enough for many families. We share the concerns of others, such as Scottish Women's Aid<sup>6</sup>, that for as long as lockdown continues there will be little help and support for many victims of domestic abuse, including many children.

In the absence of direct contact with vulnerable families in their homes, our services have aimed to ensure frequency of contact and communication with families, working together to plan how best they can be supported and get the help they need for them and their children. This includes our Sustain services<sup>7</sup>, which support families whose children are looked after at home and on the 'edge of care', or at risk of being accommodated. This support is flexible and can be increased in frequency and contact via digital communications where a family feels they need it. We have adapted our family support model to ensure that support can be delivered online and through digital technology, such as video conferencing, wherever possible, and that we continue to have sight of children and can identify any wellbeing issues or child protection concerns where they might arise as a result of current circumstances.

We have also been providing information, guidance and support to families on social distancing and self isolation to vulnerable families in an accessible way, through modelling, advice and resources. The Scottish Commission for Learning Disability (SCLD) has produced easy read information and resources for people with learning disabilities<sup>8</sup>, which have been particularly helpful for parents with learning disabilities we work with. Working alongside local social work teams, our family support services are assisting with joint visits to families' home where there are child protection concerns and contributing to social work assessments. Our services have also been liaising with social work teams in areas where we don't deliver services to highlight child protection concerns that have been identified through applications to our Urgent Assistance Fund. However, for such families who live in localities where we don't provide services, we are limited to what additional help we can provide beyond alerting local social work teams or signposting to where families can get help and support locally.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-52338706>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/services/aberlour-sustain-perth-and-kinross/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sclld.org.uk/information-on-coronavirus/>

Digital technology has been vital for maintaining contact and connections with many vulnerable families we work with, allowing us to continue to support and promote their children's wellbeing. Addressing issues around digital exclusion for low income families has been a key challenge during this crisis, as we aim to make sure all children, young people and families do not experience digital exclusion and can also remain connected to our services. Many low-income families do not have access to devices or technology, and those that do can often experience significant issues with data and credit. We are seeing that not all schools are providing pupils with digital devices and families without digital resources are struggling to complete and evidence school work. Lack of digital literacy also means some parents are struggling to support children's school work. Digital exclusion is exacerbating isolation and loneliness felt by many children, young people and parents. Along with our partners Children 1<sup>st</sup>, we have sourced and provided laptops, tablets and phones for families across Scotland who need them to keep them connected and able to continue to receive support from our services<sup>9</sup>. By providing devices we are also helping maintain connections to wider social networks and communities and supporting accessibility to online systems that families need to access, including benefits.

## Additional Comments

### Children's Services

The landscape, availability and accessibility of services and support for children, young people and families has markedly changed due to coronavirus. However, what we are seeing in communities is an escalation and intensification of existing issues. Responding to coronavirus may require greater flexibility, agility and innovation in how we deliver services, but the core issues affecting vulnerable children, young people and families have not changed. What will most make a difference to those families who continue to rely on our services is continuity and certainty that those services will continue to provide help, support and assistance whenever they need it, throughout the current crisis and beyond. Post-coronavirus, there must be some consideration on the way vital services which support children, young people and families are commissioned, funded and resourced, in order that we can anticipate and react to future crises knowing that key services will be able to continue, that children will remain safe and that children's rights will continue to be protected.

We are hugely encouraged that the Scottish Government has reinforced its commitment to fully incorporate the UNCRC during this Parliament<sup>10</sup>. We believe a children's rights approach to renewing and rebuilding our public services, communities and wider society in the aftermath of COVID-19 is key to addressing the multiple inequalities experienced by many children and young people in Scotland.

### Child Poverty

As previously outlined, we are seeing thousands more families across Scotland experiencing extreme financial hardship and being pushed into poverty as a consequence of this pandemic. This increase in

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/fighting-digital-exclusion-during-covid-19/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/strengthening-childrens-rights/>

poverty and financial hardship, as well as the consequential impact on mental health, child welfare and wellbeing, domestic abuse, substance misuse, and myriad additional and associated problems families encounter, which have been precipitated and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, will impact long into the future. Acting quickly to implement a financial assistance scheme for low income families who would be eligible for the, now delayed, Scottish Child Payment will be critical, in order to mitigate and limit the financial impact of coronavirus on already struggling families. Such immediate measures have been advocated by the UN<sup>11</sup> as the quickest and simplest way to mitigate the worst effects of poverty resulting from the impact of coronavirus. We urge that all necessary steps are taken by both the UK and Scottish Governments now, and all available policy measures are implemented, to get money directly to the children, young people and families who are most at risk of falling even further into poverty due to the current crisis.

Nonetheless, poverty levels in Scotland will rise and it is now unlikely that statutory child poverty targets will be achieved. We believe any commitment to incorporating and realising the UNCRC in Scotland must also be a commitment to securing and protecting children's social and economic rights. Therefore, in the wake of coronavirus, reconsidering how we respond to child poverty, with radical new policy and economic measures delivered through both a human and children's rights framework, will be required to prevent worsening child poverty, to ensure all families have the means to provide for their children, and to future-proof our goal of eradicating child poverty against further crises in the years and decades to come.

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[https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_children\\_16\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf)