



## **Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee**

### **Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Equalities and Human Rights inquiry**

#### **How have groups of people been affected?**

The impact of the coronavirus crisis has not been felt equally across Scotland. Corra has observed that people and communities facing disadvantage prior to the pandemic have faced greater challenges accessing their rights throughout lockdown.

*“We’re not in the same boat, we’re in the same storm and all boats are different, some are equipped with better supplies, and for others a lot of the issues that people faced pre-COVID have been compounded into a more intense situation.”* Community Co-ordinator Corra Foundation

The intersectionality of poverty has been exposed and impacts accelerated by the crisis. For many, the services and safe spaces that allowed people to access their rights closed as lockdown restrictions were imposed leaving little or no support alternatives.

#### **Digital exclusion**

The third sector demonstrated its agility and commitment to continue to support those in need, with many organisations quickly adapting to offer online services. Corra has reviewed many applications from organisations seeking funding for devices and training to help staff and services move online. However, there are challenges with the shift to digital. For instance, offering online confidential advice can be challenging if the person in need of support does not feel safe at home or has limited access to a device.

The increased shift to digital as a means of sustaining connections and promoting wellbeing during lockdown has highlighted the need for internet access and digital inclusion to be considered as a modern-day human right. Corra has learnt of the challenges of digital exclusion felt by different groups of people, including families with little or no access to devices to support children and young people with home-schooling, older people feeling ‘left behind’ as technology advances and for those experiencing language barriers, understanding and accessing available support has become increasingly difficult.

#### **Food insecurity**

The growing demand on food banks was a prominent human rights issue prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout lockdown all nine of the communities [Corra works alongside](#), saw an increase in demand for food distribution. Community Co-ordinators have also observed new groups of people reliant on food support, for instance those who have

been unable to work and accessing universal credit for the first time as well as people who are shielding because of health concerns.

A great majority of applications Corra reviewed for The Wellbeing Fund contained some element of food distribution, with organisations working at pace to collaborate with local agencies and distribute food in an effective and dignified way. Corra understands from communities and third sector organisations that dignity and choice is fundamental to engaging with those in need, alleviating stigma and ensuring that people's basic right to food is met.

### **Which groups have been disproportionately affected by the virus and the response to it?**

As part of Scottish Government's £350 million support package, Corra and partners supported the administration of several emergency funding streams to support the sector and the communities they serve. Corra Foundation staff have reflected on the pace in which funding was distributed, commenting that while this was necessary to react to the crisis, **Scottish Government and funders have a responsibility to listen to those closest to the issues and respond accordingly.**

*"Reacting at pace doesn't always leave much room for voices to be heard."* Corra, Grant Advisor

Understanding of the local context is also an important issue when responding to issues. For instance, in some rural communities the lack of regular or affordable public transport is an issue for community members. Therefore, offering local people food vouchers for supermarkets that are difficult for them to get to further exacerbates feelings of isolation and sense of agency. This highlights the importance of place-based approaches to engage with people within a community to understand their needs, aspirations and ideas for positive change in the area.

Insights from Corra's Community Co-ordinators highlights concerns over the cohort of people experiencing disadvantage who may have never engaged with services and the likelihood that they were overlooked during the height of the crisis.

Coronavirus has exposed the complex multi-layered disadvantages in communities. People experiencing a combination of intersectional disadvantage have been hit the hardest by coronavirus and left behind in its response. The crisis has illuminated the stark difference between those with social capital and those without.

### **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities**

Only eight per cent of applications Corra received to the Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund and one per cent of applications to the Third Sector Resilience Fund were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. Given the increasing evidence illustrating the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, it is apparent that the response to the crisis has not gone far enough to connect and reach into these communications. The pandemic has not only exposed long standing inequalities facing from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in the UK it has

exacerbated them. This includes socio-economic disadvantages such as inequalities in health, education, employment and housing, as well as highlighting racial disparities.

Some from Black, Asian and minority ethnic families have faced considerable challenges in accessing and understanding the regular changes to lockdown restrictions, as well as difficulties trying to navigate online systems, completing online forms and access to appropriate advice and support. For instance, social security, welfare support and foodbanks.

There is a significant digital connectivity gap where from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities on low incomes, have low or limited digital skills with limited or no access to internet or suitable devices to connect. Several of the children that took part in Corra's community story in collaboration with SCORE Scotland<sup>1</sup> had received an electronic device for their household through local digital inclusion projects to enable them to maintain important educational and social connections including school, youth clubs, churches and mosques.

### **Children and young people**

As noted in the Scottish Parliament's inquiry into mental health support for young people<sup>2</sup>, the impact of coronavirus is likely to have a long-term effect on the lives and wellbeing of children and young people. Children and young people have shared their experiences of lockdown as part of Corra's community stories, revealing the challenges of home schooling, feelings of loneliness and the uncertainty of transitioning between primary and secondary school.

*"It {coronavirus} has affected me because, I am worried and nervous, I have been really sad, I have been very angry. I hate change. I like to know what is going to happen and now I don't and that has really bothered me. I miss my teacher. I have not been looking after myself properly. Life has been really hard. And I have been struggling from anxiety."* Young Person<sup>3</sup>

Corra welcomes the recommendations made to Scottish Government by the inquiry, particularly around making mental health support pathways clearer for children and young people and improve the guidance available for parents and carers.

It will also be important to provide opportunities for children and young people to share their views and ideas about their future. The response to the coronavirus pandemic left little room for children and young people to express their concerns and be part of the conversation on returning to schools. A statement<sup>4</sup> published by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland highlights the lack of children's voices both in the response as well as in the Recovery advisory groups that have been set up.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.corra.scot/community-stories/superheroes-vs-covid-19/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/110078.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.corra.scot/community-stories/broughton-primary-school-coronavirus-lockdown-and-reflections-on-buildforwardbetter/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cypcs.org.uk/news-and-stories/rights-of-children-overlooked-during-coronavirus-emergency/>

*“The pandemic has revealed that we’ve not made as much progress on children’s rights as we would like to think in Scotland. Under pressure, too many of our systems and structures reverted to treating children as passive recipients of charity and welfare rather than active agents in their own lives and valued members of our communities.”* Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland.

### **Disabled people and unpaid Carers**

Disabled people and unpaid carers have also been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Vital support for disabled people and their families has been significantly reduced, which has had a negative impact on the wellbeing of many. The ONS<sup>5</sup> Opinions and Lifestyle Survey found 73% of disabled people said they were ‘very worried’ about the impact coronavirus was having on their life and 62% said they were concerned about their wellbeing, including feeling isolated, feeling apprehensive about being in public, collecting groceries and receiving treatment for non-coronavirus related health concerns.

A powerful blog<sup>6</sup> shared with Corra by Lynn Williams voices the need for carers and disabled people to be included in the response so their rights can be realised:

*“What little control we had over the course of our lives has been snatched from us. Meanwhile, the “great and good” are at the helm and those of us who have faced the Covid storm head on are not being allowed onto the bridge to help steer our own future. Where are the voices of disabled adults? Of disabled children? Of older people caring for their spouse or the many new carers created by this invisible enemy?”*

### **Isolation and Loneliness**

In 2018 Corra contributed evidence and insights from across its grantmaking and place-based work to the Connected Scotland: Social Isolation and Loneliness consultation. The evidence gathered highlighted that isolation and loneliness is experienced across demographics and walks of life. From work alongside communities Corra understands that coronavirus has heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness.

The closure of community spaces that provide opportunities for people to come together has impacted people’s opportunities to participate in their local area, build friendships and combat isolation. Corra’s recent response<sup>7</sup> to The Town Centre Expert Review Group call for evidence, demonstrated the role of accessible spaces as an asset to the community. Not only to support local development and democracy but also to support the wellbeing of local residents by providing vital opportunities for people to come together, make connections and create positive changes in their area.

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[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsondisabledpeopleingreatbritain/may2020#:~:text=Nearly%20two%2Dthirds%20\(62.4%25\),%25\)%20of%20non%2Ddisabled%20adults.&text=This%20has%20remained%20similar%20to,adults%20earlier%20in%20the%20pandemic.](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsondisabledpeopleingreatbritain/may2020#:~:text=Nearly%20two%2Dthirds%20(62.4%25),%25)%20of%20non%2Ddisabled%20adults.&text=This%20has%20remained%20similar%20to,adults%20earlier%20in%20the%20pandemic.)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.corra.scot/blogs/the-coronavirus-storm-no-safe-port/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.corra.scot/news/corra-foundations-response-to-the-town-centre-expert-review-group/>

**What do the Scottish Government and public authorities (e.g. local authorities, health boards etc.) need to change or improve as a matter of urgency?**

**Bridge the digital divide.**

Corra supports the Scottish Government announcement<sup>8</sup> to invest £15 million to support families to get online and would welcome further opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage to participate in online life. Including investing in accessible and creative opportunities for people to engage in education, support services and connect with their community.

**Provide meaningful opportunities for people experiencing disadvantage to inform decisions and policy making about Scotland's future.**

Corra believes that when people have opportunities to participate in their community, decision making and wider society; power shifts enabling people to create the change that matters to them. It will be critical that conversations on Scotland's future involve listening to those typically furthest from power.

Communities across Scotland have been grappling with issues of poverty and inequality for some time, and while the uncertainty of Brexit continues to loom, the coronavirus crisis has exposed complex and deep-rooted issues such as food insecurity and unequal divisions between ethnic minority and majority populations.

The crisis has also highlighted the strength of communities to mobilise and initiate social action. Corra has been learning from examples of how communities have responded and supported each other. For instance an initiative led by local people [preparing homemade meals](#) to feed hundreds of families. Listening and learning from these stories provides a powerful insight into what communities can achieve.

**What do the Scottish Government and public authorities (e.g. local authorities, health boards etc.) need to change or improve in the medium to long term?**

The coronavirus pandemic is both a health and social crisis, with enormous ramifications on the welfare and livelihoods of many. The recovery and rebuild must put the wellbeing of people and their communities at the centre.

**Address the issues that have been laid bare**

The coronavirus pandemic has made systemic inequalities visible, addressing these will require a bold system change response that is centred on human rights and listening to those furthest from power.

This includes a commitment to understanding and tackling racial injustice. Corra welcomes the inclusion of measures to address these issues in the 2020 Programme for Government,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/news/connecting-scotland/>

as well as the continued work of the Human Rights taskforce to develop a blueprint for human rights legislation. The Programme for Government also makes reference to considering the incorporation of the UN Convention on Racial Discrimination and the UN Convention of the Rights of Disabled People. Incorporation of these conventions would be a significant step advancing human rights in policy and practice. Corra would support opportunities for consultation regarding incorporation that seek out the views of from Black, Asian and minority ethnic and disabled people.

The issues highlighted in this response should also be considered in the context of Brexit and the potential that this may further exacerbate economic and social inequalities. When considering the impact of Brexit back in 2018, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Philip Alston highlighted that *“anyone concerned with poverty in the UK has reason to be very deeply concerned”*. Overcoming the existing challenges and those that may lie ahead will require input from those closest to the issues yet typically furthest from power. Corra Chief Executive Fiona Duncan’s [blog](#), calls upon those with a seat around the decision making table to make room for the voices of communities across Scotland in order to build forward better.

### **Support place-based working to build forward better**

Community wealth building models as well as traction from the Local Governance Review were creating positive momentum across the communities Corra works alongside prior to the pandemic. For instance, Fernhill and Blacklands designed and delivered a participatory budgeting process that allowed community members to have their say in how funding was distributed in their area with £10,000 supporting ten local projects in Fernhill.

The Scottish Government Supporting Communities Fund supported local organisations to take the lead in their response to coronavirus. This involved a considerable collaborative effort to accelerate community action and Corra would welcome opportunities to learn from and sustain these approaches.

Corra is developing Participatory Scotland model based on Participatory City Foundation model ([www.weareeveryone.org](http://www.weareeveryone.org)). This model focusses on developing local activities and initiatives that are designed by and for the community. There is an opportunity for Participatory Scotland to build on pre-COVID and emergent levels of community participation.