Separated migrant children and connectivity during Covid 19

Working Paper 1

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Introduction

This study, entitled, *Supporting separated migrant children to thrive during Covid-19*, has been funded by UKRI (ESRC) as part of its response to the UKRI Covid -19 crisis in the UK. The study investigates how services to this vulnerable group have been affected by the pandemic. It is also providing its own service in the form of an art-based intervention to give separated young people a way of expressing their experience of Covid and support them with their English. In this first working paper from the project, we report on preliminary findings on service provision, the ways in which this has changed in the last year, and how such changes affected separated children's connectivity during the pandemic.

Context

The United Nations High Commissioner (1997) defines separated migrant children, or 'unaccompanied minors' in its terms, as *'separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so'.* Almost 14,000 separated migrant children applied for asylum in the EU in 2019 (Eurostat 2020). In Scotland, a country of 5.454 million, latest published figures suggest an estimated 140 separated children looked after by local authorities (Rigby et al., 2018).

Separated migrant children (who we will refer to as separated children in this paper) have been shown to face social isolation, irrespective of Covid-19 (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010; Hopkins and Hill 2008; Kohli 2006), with increased risks for children living in more rural or remote areas away from the major hubs of service provision (Rigby et al. 2018). Without parents/caregivers close by, their connections to support networks, to social work, education and legal services, and to peers are vital. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these networks and services poses additional risks for separated children's well-being and ability to thrive, socially and educationally.

Previous research has revealed that networks that offer strong inter-professional collaboration, opportunities for peer interaction and familiarity with immigration and welfare processes are core to meeting separated children's needs (Rigby et al. 2018; Lucas et al. 2019). However, during the Covid-19 crisis separated children have been in danger of losing educational and social opportunities and their connection to services and other networks may also have been affected.

Study aims and brief description of methods

The study aims to:

- Understand how separated children (aged 12-18) experience crisis and how Covid-19 has impacted on their connectivity to networks (e.g. peers) and services (e.g. education, Guardianship services).

- Explore the ways in which professionals have adapted practices to mitigate the impact of restrictions on: a) service provision and b) networks connectivity, and to identify best practice.
- Deliver and evaluate an on-line intervention for young people to produce language-based artefacts on their experiences of crisis, including COVID-19, in order to support their educational goals.
- Disseminate best practice for service providers working with separated children in the UK in times of crisis.

To meet these aims we are conducting a 4-stage study, adopting a mixed-methods approach which comprises an electronic survey; online qualitative interviews with stakeholders and separated children in Scotland; focus groups to test and refine materials for wider UK audiences; a linguistic ethnography of the language-based intervention, and a qualitative survey on the views and experiences of UK and international stakeholders on the intervention and findings.

In the first stage of this study, which is taking place in Scotland, we have interviewed both service providers and young people who access the services. Figure 1 shows which groups were interviewed, the number of interview participants and the number we plan to interview[1]:

Participants	Number interviewed	Number we plan to interview
Separated children	13	12
Guardians	4	4
Solicitors	2	2
ESOL tutors	5	4
Care workers/foster carers	1	6
Social workers	2	4

Figure 1: Interviews: groups and numbers interviewed

The separated children group comprised young people between the ages of 15 and 18. We interviewed eleven males and two females (which mirrors the ratio of male to female separated children in Scotland). Most separated children had arrived in Scotland before Covid-19, but two had arrived during the pandemic and one just at the beginning of it. Young people's countries of origin included Vietnam (n=4) (where most recent arrivals seem to be from), a range of countries in the Middle East (n=4) and southern and western Africa countries (n=6). Where the young people requested it, interpreters of Vietnamese, Arabic, Kurdish Sorani and Bajuni Swahili attended the interview. As well as the two researchers who interviewed the separated children, both of whom have a PVG certificate (Protecting Vulnerable Groups), a support worker from the Scottish Guardianship Service attended all the interviews.

In Scotland, there is a dedicated service for supporting separated children and young people, including victims of trafficking, who arrive in Scotland alone: the Scottish Guardianship Service. Guardians support this vulnerable group through immigration and welfare processes; offer the emotional support needed to go through such processes act as advocates and help them to make informed decisions about their future.

Given that many separated children are making a claim for asylum, we thought it important to interview solicitors who deal with these cases for their view on how services had been disrupted. The ESOL tutors came from different areas of Scotland and all had experience of working with separated children. Most separated children in Scotland are in college rather than school and this was represented in our interview cohort. Carers/foster carers and social workers are all central to the well-being of separated children and as we say in footnote 1, we hope to complete our interviews with these groups in the near future.

Accessing interview participants

Despite what we believe are our strong professional credentials (one member of the team is a former ESOL tutor and another a registered social worker), at first we found it quite difficult to find colleagues and separated children to interview. ESOL tutors were recruited through a snowball approach and, in the end, we exceeded our target number. The Scottish Guardianship Service brokered the interviews with separated children and again we also exceeded the number we originally set out to talk to. However, we had less success initially in accessing social workers and carers. There are a number of reasons for this which we believe are worth discussing in this section on findings.

While recruiting participants for research can always be a challenge, those employed by local authorities to work with separated children seem even more anxious than most about talking to researchers (see Rigby et al 2018). This may be because many local authorities in Scotland have limited experience of working with this group and there may be some reluctance to discuss these limitations and uncertainties. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, there were plans in place to interview the identified numbers of social workers and support workers.

Findings

In this paper we report on preliminary findings from qualitative interviews with professionals supporting separated children to ascertain how connectivity has changed and how it has affected separated children. Specifically we aim to answer the following research questions:

1. How have professionals adapted their services to separated children during the pandemic?
2. According to professionals, how have separated children experienced the changes with regard to their connectivity to networks (e.g. peers) and services (e.g. education, guardianship services)?

Our answers develop new knowledge to: benefit service provision during the continued context of the Covid-19 pandemic; inform practices during this and subsequent crises and upheavals; improve support overall by learning from separated migrant children's experiences of crisis.

Finding 1: Connectivity – the importance of space

Participants spoke of the physical spaces where services are housed and delivered as welcoming spaces of connectivity pre-Covid. In these spaces, separated children could build relationships with peers and workers, thus creating and enhancing opportunities for connectivity and helping children develop a sense of belonging, as this Guardian noted:

It's [the service space] full, the people are all lovely, whenever someone new walks in the door we always introduce them to everybody that's there and everybody says hi, like we're all here, you know, and we've got a really nice space that's quite young people-friendly … so we got box of, like, chocolate is there, and it's always tea and coffee, and there's, like, a foosball table, and we sit on couches. So, there's a view of inviting them to warmth and, like, when young people come in…. So, they like the space and it's very much their space, we always talk about it as being, like, their space. (P2)

Within these spaces, face-to-face group activities were designed with the specific aim of enhancing connectivity with peers. For example, pre-Covid work involved group activities that would bring separated children in the same space (participation group/yoga) or group activities that involved getting together outdoors (walk in Loch Lomond national park). In this way, activities aim to promote connectivity between separated children, between separated children and the Guardianship and between separated children and their new communities and country.

Guardians pointed out that the connectivity engendered by activities in physical space was difficult to achieve for separated children arriving in Scotland during Covid:

I think that there's a very distinct difference in the, they have when they arrive here. They have no family, you know, they have no, the connections there, their family or their friends, and they make kinda familial like connections with workers or people that they trust. And that's, kinda, like a big bit of the difference. .. And I think that's the fundamental, like, issue for the kids is that it's just the connection … it's just like, it's just not there. And yeah, it would be like taking you away from your family for nine months. (P2)

Schools and colleges have spent much of the last year closed, with classes moved online, and this has affected the connectivity between teachers and students and between students. Teachers discussed how bonds were created between students not only in class but in the extra curricular spaces:

The extra curricular stuff that we do is the stuff that actually where they meet. So actually the mini bus journey is fantastic… as I'm driving the mini bus I can hear all these little friendships. 'cause they're all together in a way that they wouldn't be normally. And that's really nice. You see friendships happening that can't happen in a classroom with the best will in the world. (P11)

Attending religious spaces – highlighted as very important for some Christian separated children – was also affected by Covid restrictions, as mentioned by the interviewee below:

Very difficult to go and worship during the festive period, which would be a big part of their lives. So trying to get them to see the big picture is hard. (P4)

Physical spaces were also highlighted by the legal profession as important for fostering connections:

(…) and your space is important and how you move in that space is important. Now these things sound very strange and non-legal and like.. but they're really important in setting the pace with the young person and you know, through experience, you get used to working out how to do that, even the way we dress. You know why I dress in T shirts and jeans all the time. And so yeah, there are different ways of doing it. You lose all of that through video conferencing you don't have control over the space. (P4)

Physical space was not only important for developing connectivity to legal support but also for ensuring that separated children understand the importance of the legal process to allow them to say in the UK. One legal representative told us that a sense of gravitas was much less easy to create online, taking away from the perceived importance of the content of their meetings with children.

Finding 2: Connectivity – the importance of meeting face-to-face

The initial meeting with separated children was considered the most important by some of the professionals as they believed it shaped the ongoing relationship. From this perspective, separated children who arrived during the pandemic were at something of a disadvantage:

From my experience, there has been a distinct shift or difference in clients that were pre-existing clients and you had already built that relationship and then you were just moving to engagement. (P3)

For one professional, relationships were developed through face-to-face and meetings and touch:

But also, if somebody's upset, like we're – well, I'm quite tactile in terms of being a worker, like, so if someone comes to me in they are, you know, I would sit closer to them, and if it's appropriate I would put my hand around them, you know, so you just can … we've got this on the phone now. And it's, I mean, I find it, as a professional, difficult. Like I, I have found it difficult, especially in the earlier parts of Covid I found that difficult to deal with. Like, not being able to offer anything other than words [laugh]. (P2)

Others also highlighted the importance of different modalities in developing relationships:

There's something deceptive about doing a meeting like this. You lose that human interaction and human engagement. That, and there's non- verbal cues are harder to pick up on when you're talking. Very difficult, sensitive and traumatizing information, and I worry about that far more than I did when I was doing it in person. (P3)

While another professional suggested that the affordances of face-to-face meetings went beyond developing relationships:

So I haven't had any disasters yet. But you know, it's inevitable that you, that there's going to be one you know point in time where there's, where a meeting has to stop because of the stress that I wasn't able to see. Whereas if we were in person that I would have been. I'm I'm yeah so it's still it's that that that is something that will inevitably happen, I'm sure. (P4)

Finding 3: Connectivity – issues with moving online

Adapting teaching, activities and meetings for online delivery was not always straightforward as there were identifiable barriers. Participants spoke of lack of availability of technological equipment that would enable separated children to connect: often availability depended on how active local authorities were in securing this (there are 32 local authorities in Scotland). Children and young people did not always know how to use the equipment or did not have a reliable internet connection. In addition, not all activities were equally easy to transfer on line, with group work being described as more problematic compared to individual appointments because of language barriers and the physicality of being in a room together:

… it's 'cause it's just not tangible to have seventy young people online, and some of the kids don't like it. Cause they can't understand … Language is not so much a barrier when you're face-to-face 'cause you can use physical gestures and things are a lot easier. Or you can just be there sitting amongst other people talking, and you don't feel so strange. So, there are so many things, there are so many losses in terms of, like, the physical contact. (P2)

Additionally, online communication was discussed as a completely different experience for professionals who were now called to adjust their way of working with children and young people.

Zoom, Microsoft Teams and that is a different way of working. There's a difference, all of the skills and experience that you, one might have built up and developed in terms of working with someone you know in a round at a meeting table, for instance requires to shift. (P3)

It was also noted that new ways of remote working transformed interactions into more formal events by taking away the opportunity for informal chat. Pre-Covid, informal interactions were deemed crucial in helping separated children deal with the stress and anxiety of what are often experienced as daunting meetings with other professionals, especially solicitors and representatives of the Home Office.

I try to, like, bring humour into stuff, and try to make things quite relaxed .. but we always break things up with, like, a cup of tea if it's getting quite intense, you know? Yeah, and so yeah, I think maybe … and I would if I'm in a lawyer's appointment in, I would quite often be like, chat about something, so I'd be like, 'oh, you got a haircut, did you see blah blah blah'? You know, we, you know, nice haircut, and tell me about your new girlfriend … or we have a bit of like banter to just make it more relaxed. But that seems…. Zoom doesn't seem like the place for that, like. So that stuff where you actually develop in the relationship and things like that it doesn't, it doesn't really allow for that [..]. (P2)

According to an interviewee, the significance of important meetings may somehow be lost in cyberspace exactly because of the effects of the medium through which they now had to happen:

I think that's very interesting because it's, it's the perception of the interaction…and could be very important, grave consequences for any child or any person… but now just seems to be getting lost I think through this communication. (P3)

It could be that this is explained by the fatigue of doing everything online, which was noted by various interviews in different professional roles. Alternatively, it may also relate to the fact that children are joining these meetings from their homes, and thus using the same devices in the same spaces for other activities such as attending English classes, speaking

to their Guardians or socialising online with friends. Many of the spatial and affective cues that would usually distinguish such activities have been removed, or at least significantly diminished. The quotation below from a legal professional is illustrative of the impatience often felt and exhibited by separated children, but also the consequences this may have for their lives:

It takes longer to take the statements because of this… So, um, yeah, there's a lot of fatigue there I think towards the end. I just finished two statements this week and it was a case of… like the children said at the end, like 'I just want this over. I just want this over', and that presents some dangers actually where they are not as careful as they should be. They are maybe not … they are, their impatience is leading them to perhaps not to really take in what I'm saying about the importance of what we're doing. They are just saying something to get it over with. That's what gets you in trouble later on in the process. (P4)

The interviewee highlighted the impact of this with a specific example:

I've got a young person right now. His story is very, very complicated. And there are difficulties within it, and I'm trying to iron out these difficulties. I'm trying to iron out potentials for contradictions. I'm trying to make sure that actually what he is telling me is what he remembers and not just this, not just telling me something to get this process over with, which is a very common thing with young people, because it will kill his claim. You know, in six months' time. And it's getting them to understand that and, but also to appreciate that they do need to try and bear with me a little bit and so this process does make that harder. (P4)

Learning English is a priority for most separated children and moving online has affected the amount of direct tuition separated children receive from ESOL tutors. Pre-Covid, separated children would attend college (or sometimes school) full-time, taking around 17 hours of classes, predominantly in English language. For most separated children, the move online has resulted in a reduction in the number of hours of direct tuition they receive to between one and four hours per day. When an ESOL tutor was asked if children were better or worse off than before the pandemic, one replied:

Worse off. I mean, English language teaching needs to be face-to-face, especially at the really low levels. So, they're still working, they are still motivated, but I personally don't think they're getting the same level of support or input as they were before. (P12)

Nearly all extra-curricular activities, such as gardening, have ceased. Nevertheless, attendance remains good, which one ESOL tutor put down to the classes being a 'lifeline'. However, ESOL tutors report that at the beginning of lockdown, technology was a problem:

It's almost impossible for them to work out how to log on to Zoom or Teams or Moodle on their own without any support…they don't have the equipment or the Wi-Fi access, so that's the biggest issue… They tend to use their phones, 'cause that's all they've got. (P13)

Online learning has highlighted the issue that some separated children have with communicating with other students:

We've noted, in some ways, it's helped them understand their own difficulties especially with pronunciation, because when you're face-to-face in a class doing group work, that's one thing, when you're in breakout rooms online it's harder, so they are beginning to realize that

other people are struggling to understand more, so they're putting more effort into their pronunciation while they can. (P11)

Finding 4: Connectivity-professional services

Covid- 19 was described as- initially- causing chaos with most services reported by interviewees as pulling back substantially. This was described as leaving professionals at a loss of how to continue to support separated children.

A lot of these services kind of stopped and we don't really know what was happening at the beginning. So, health services was just, like, they just stopped – I mean completely, you know … The specialist mental health service that we refer young people into, they stopped assessing young people, and a lot of young people were in a really difficult place, really difficult, and we had, you know, had cases where you were working with attempted suicides, were working with self-harm or suicidal ideations, like really poor, and most services stopped. And, and obviously when it gets to really high risk then you check into, like, a community psychiatric nurses and community mental health teams. Those services didn't stop, the community psychiatric nurses and health team, but their threshold is pretty high. So healthy young people are getting to the point of reaching that threshold, we're the only one, like … And social work services, to be honest, also massively pulled back in the early stages of Covid. I just felt, like … it just felt like, what do we do? (P2)

Participants offering legal support to separated migrant children also spoke of concerns around 'broken seamlessness', with children falling through the cracks. However, even within this context of risk to all, there appear to be hierarchies of vulnerability with some children and young people finding themselves at greater risk. The quotation below clearly conveys the impossibility of the situation a young person, whose age was disputed by the Home Office and whose suffering was exacerbated by disconnected services due to Covid-19 restrictions. Of particular note here is the nightmarish context within which the child found themselves, involving a mass stabbing of six people at a city centre hotel in Glasgow where asylum seekers were moved by a private housing provider at the beginning of lockdown:

This young person was dispersed to Glasgow.. ends up in the [name of hotel]. No phone, no support, no money. No idea what is going on. No language. Then the attack at the Park Inn Hotel happened a couple of weeks after he arrived. So a lot of chaos in the hotel… eventually got referred to me by the British Red Cross – the British Red Cross conducted a sweep of the hotels to find out any potential unaccompanied minors after a boy that was stabbed was an unaccompanied minor ... I got a bunch of referrals after that. And this boy was one of them, and he effectively he'd missed the deadline and his asylum claim because he was just given a letter by a lawyer in England that you could not read. He couldn't get access to a lawyer himself. Obviously, he couldn't leave the hotel. And you know, what do you do with that? We couldn't even… in terms of communicating with him at the initial stage, I was having to use the reception phone in the hotel. Didn't even have a mobile. He was just picked up and dumped by the Home Office. (P4)

The restrictions brought on by Covid-19 appear to have accentuated characteristics of relationships amongst professionals that were formed pre-Covid. On the one hand, there existed disconnections between professionals which were exacerbated because of Covid restrictions (an example of such disconnect involves communication and interaction between legal services offered to separated children and Police Scotland). On the other, pre-existing, close working relationships between professionals were described as a factor ensuring continuity in care and avoiding what was described as 'shambolic' service provision in these

initial days of lock down, as in the following account from a professional from a small rural community:

One of the advantages of [name of Scottish local authority] being so small is that everybody knows each other and have done so for some time so working relationships tend to be pretty good and people have been able to adapt pretty quickly. So a lot of the 3ʳᵈ sector organisations have found new ways of working and keeping in touch with folks ….I think that is a very important point because although now everything is online you are dealing with people you knew previously. I think that is a different scenario to dealing with new people….I think that does make a difference. I mean we are lucky that a lot of people who are involved with us [the service] have been about for some time now, it just makes things easier, just picking up the phone and getting things done, much more quicker, you call in favours and generally get things done (P6)

Of particular note here is connections between educational services and social workers/key workers. One ESOL tutor told us:

We haven't met them, it's all email now, so it's not quite the same. They used to come in with them [separated children], especially when they were being assessed for the first time, you'd meet the social workers, you'd meet key workers, but that's gone now, yeah. (P14)

These missing connections may have consequences for identifying when young people are experiencing particularly stressful periods. This is of particular concern given that post-migration stressors, such as the asylum process, have been shown to adversely affect separated children's mental health (Chas et al., 2019). As one interviewee described it:

[W]hen it hits, it hits hard. So, that would be a problem, especially if they had a negative response from the Home Office and they were going through an appeal process or something like that. So, it's, it's the mental health issues more than anything. It's like … some of them wait for ages before they hear from the Home Office, so there's that fear they don't know what's happening to them. Some of them have, most of them have an initial negative response and they have to go through the whole appeal processes. The biggest thing is balancing what's going on in their personal life with the college and being sensitive to that. (P3)

A further issue that participants highlighted was the emotional burden that loss of connectivity with services may mean for a group of children fighting to develop a stable sense of belonging because of traumatic experiences on their journey to Scotland. This was often discussed as contributing to a sense of being in 'limbo'.

And an additional thing I'd say is that everything stopped, so these kids are on a process like when they arrive and not moving forward, and that process is really important to them to make them feel like they're going somewhere.., and it stopped. Again, so like … housing has stopped, housing referrals to move like from your rubbish temporary accommodation to whatever stopped. The asylum process totally stopped, whereby now a lot of kids would normally have a visa, they would be settled. It was paused for, like, ten months, and maybe they went for an interview and the decision should have been issued in two weeks and then they've been waiting nine months and they don't know if they, they would be refused and sent back. So, .. progress towards becoming settled and making [inaudible] home, that's all paused. (P2)

As participants noted, services had since adapted and – at the time of writing – were able to start supporting separated migrant children again; this was either through online ways of working or limited face to face appointments at periods were restrictions were lifted.

Finding 5: Connectivity- Some perceived benefits of Covid-19 restrictions

It was also noted that being able to connect online meant that geographical distance was no longer making it difficult for professionals to connect with children and young people living remotely. Indeed, legal professionals supporting separated children reported using a hybrid model of face to face and remotely held meeting even before the pandemic. In addition, restrictions meant that for both professionals and children, it was easier to arrange appointments given that everybody had to stay at home. Both these things offered professionals the opportunity to establish more regular contact with separated children.

I mean, I think one thing that has been quite positive is you tend to be able to get young people, you know, you make an appointment, and they are there because they are not going anywhere [laugh], you know….I'm more productive in terms of, like, how much contact I have with people, because we're not having to travel 'cause we work with young people all over Scotland … I've got a client that lives in [Scottish town] and it would take me, it would take three hours out of my day to get to that client, and now all my appointments are online, so I've managed to see that person, like, really regularly, and being able to be constantly. (P2)

Being able to connect online with separated children living remotely was described as a positive development that came out of Covid-19 restrictions and could potentially be adopted after restrictions are lifted with the caveat that it is supplemented with face to face appointments and always according to the needs of the child as participants noted. In this respect, brief appointments with children and young people living remotely that entail a simple check-up, as the participant notes below, could continue to take place online.

I used to have cases pre-Covid which were actually in another local authority, and I don't think they probably got as much input as the ones that are closer to where we were. […] But … I definitely think if we had an office space where we could actually sit and have video calls and things like that, just to check in on kids, and it would be really, really positive. So yeah, I think, I do think there's some really positive things that have come up with ways to communicate as well, like online. Yeah, we could fit more in, we could fit more engagement with the young people in, but I think it needs to be linked in with seeing them as well. (P2)

A further positive development that was born out of working under Covid restrictions was innovation in practice born out of necessity. Participants spoke of having to adapt ways of working but also develop new approaches in order to help separated children connect with both professionals and peers. The following quotation is illustrative of a new 'buddy system' that was put into place to help make connections that would have been previously promoted through group activities, albeit organically in the latter case. This development was described as especially meaningful for children and young people living in remote areas and/or in foster care. Even more pronounced was the significance of such an approach for those who had arrived in Scotland during the pandemic and had not had the chance yet to form relationships. The system below was described as a potentially useful approach in terms of peer work that could continue after restrictions are lifted.

And they're quite new and especially those who arrived at the beginning of Covid and they'd never had the chance to meet people with that, like … So, for example, I've got a case like

that …I actually introduced her over a video call to another young person of the same nationality that I knew was quite warm and welcoming … so I knew a few of the Guardians have done that, and so I basically said, this is, like, this person hopefully you can get to meet … with the permission and all, obviously all that checks in social work and all of that first, but we did that. And then when the lockdown got lifted slightly, she was able to come and meet that young person outside… even just one connection I think is important. (P2)

Participants felt that children both needed and valued opportunities to connect with professionals, something that was attributed to lack of distractions from everyday life, activities that Covid restrictions prevented from taking place. There were mixed perspectives on how young people interacted with professionals online: some participants felt that children not only engaged more often with professionals under restrictions but also more attentively, while others expressed concerns about the limitations of online-only communication.

Discussion

For the most part, Covid-19 has impacted on separated children's connectivity to services and on the interconnectivity between professional services. There has been a near total move to online working by all service providers. For those which provide emotional support to separated children and are responsible for safeguarding them, online meetings have reduced the tools available. For example, professionals report that it is difficult to 'read' separated children and to pick up on clues to their mental well-being. For educators, online learning has reduced the number of hours of face to face time that they have with separated children with the result that separated children are 'worse' off. In addition, the opportunities for separated children to mix with classmates and other members of their communities has almost disappeared during the pandemic, and these disruptions to their social networks have resulted in a phenomena referred to by Strang and Sagan (2021) as 'sudden onset isolation'. Similarly, the curtailment of their access to extra-curricular activities has left separated children bored and in some cases without routine, a finding also reported in the *Left out locked down* study by Armstrong and Pickering (2021).

Lack of access to technology or to the internet has meant that some separated children have been following classes on a mobile phone, which is not an appropriate tool for engaging with teachers, other students and online platforms such as Moodle. This finding ties in with those from the general education and health literature on technology deprivation during the Covid pandemic in under-privileged families (e.g. Ziauddeen et al., 2020).

Those who provide services also report that connecting to separated children has changed because of the move online. Activities which were previously considered informal and an opportunity to get to know separated children better, are formalised because the online platforms, such as Zoom or Teams, make spontaneous speech and camaraderie difficult, particularly in larger groups. In contrast, legal colleagues noted that separated children may not understand the seriousness of some meetings because they are held online and therefore may not pay due attention, leading to potentially life-changing consequences.

While all these findings suggest material changes to connectivity between separated children and professional services, there have also been more existential changes. Space has emerged from the data as a key construct in how we understand the experiences of separated children. Welcoming spaces for gatherings provided pre-Covid by the Scottish Guardianship Service and social services allowed separated children to meet each other in a supportive environment. Not only did these spaces enhance communication between

separated children and services and between the separated children themselves, from the service providers' perspectives at least, the spaces represented places of coming together in a similar way to a family home. The reduction in spaces available to separated migrant children as a result of Covid is an unexpected finding and one that deserves further investigation as the project develops.

Finally in this section it is clear that inter-professional connectivity was also disrupted, at least in the early days of the Covid pandemic. Where there were problems with communication between services this has been further exposed by Covid, but where there was good working and communication this has continued. This inconsistency needs to be addressed to ensure that no child is left in precarious circumstances, whatever the situation and crisis.

Moving forward

As we write, we have moved into the second stage of the project, an intervention which gives separated children the opportunity to articulate their feelings about this and other crises, while developing English language skills. Twelve young people are working with a global group of artists, rappers, photographers, story tellers and English language tutors to develop artefacts that represent their experiences. The project team is supporting the intervention and conducting an online linguistic ethnography (Copland and Creese, 2015) to understand how young people articulate, share and make sense of their Covid lives. Initial findings will be shared in a second Working Paper and Briefing Paper to be published in late May. In April, a webinar will be held to explore the issues raised in this Working Paper and in Briefing Paper 1, which can also be found on our website **https://separatedinscotland.co.uk/**.

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[1] It has proved difficult to contact and interview both social workers and care workers/foster carers during the lockdown but we are hoping to conclude the interviews in the near future