

# Responding to COVID-19: Supporting Children, Young People & Families at Aberlour

April 2020



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## Supporting Children, Young People & Families at Aberlour

### 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a time of great change and unparalleled disruption for all of us. In Scotland, all organisations who work with and support vulnerable children, young people and families are having to respond to unprecedented challenges in how we provide help and support, as we react to this global public health crisis. At Aberlour, from our frontline staff and volunteers delivering vital direct support in communities around the country, to our office-based support staff and teams which keep the organisation functioning, we have had to come to terms with working in fundamentally new and different ways. In doing so, our clear focus is to continue to provide the crucial help and support that vulnerable children, young people and families we work with all across Scotland desperately need, in whatever way we can.

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At Aberlour, 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 work with 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. The resilience and determination of our services and staff as they manage and respond to this crisis has been both incredible and humbling, as we see so many of our people go above and beyond to ensure that vital support, a lifeline for many, remains available to families at a time when it is needed most.

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;

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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 [Urgent Assistance Fund](#) to provide basic and essential items for families who otherwise cannot afford them.

We anticipate the level of need we are responding to will at least double as a result of current circumstances. Worryingly, we are now seeing a rise in child protection concerns, domestic abuse reporting, mental health concerns and financial hardship around the country, with already vulnerable families needing a range of additional supports to counter the worst effects and the consequential stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenges we face in responding to this crisis mean we cannot continue to provide exactly the same level of support as we would normally to many children, young people and families. However, working within the necessary limitations and restrictions currently in place, we have aimed to make sure no child, young person or family we work with is left in need. Therefore, we have focused on **key priorities** for working with children, young people and families by:

- **Ensuring the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people;**
- **Keeping families connected to our services;**
- **Alleviating the impact of poverty and financial hardship.**

The steps we have taken and efforts we have made to continue to provide help and support have not been in isolation. The Third Sector is a key partner working alongside the Scottish Government, local authorities and other public services to support the most vulnerable in our communities, to keep them safe and ensure they are supported. That joined up and collective approach has never been needed more than at this time of national crisis. As we work to make sure all the children, young people and families we work with get the help and support they need, it has been crucial that we have continued to work together alongside partners in government, local authorities, health services and other Third Sector organisations, to plan and implement collective action, to share resources and to signpost to where help and support is available for any children, young people and families who need it, aiming to ensure no one is left without help and support.

What the children, young people and families we work with need most at this time is to know that Aberlour will still be there for them. We are doing all that we can to ensure that certainty, continuity and reassurance, that we **can** and **will** continue to deliver help and support for those who need us most.

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## Ensuring the Safety, Welfare and Wellbeing of Children and Young People

In our [residential services](#) and children's houses the COVID-19 pandemic has required particular dedication and commitment from staff teams to significantly change the way they work, to make sure they can be there for our most vulnerable children and young people and to keep them safe. Staff teams in individual houses have adapted their shift patterns into 'cohort' teams, which has meant these 'cohorts' or teams of staff spending between 5 and 7 days living with the children, minimising movement and the risk of spreading coronavirus. This has been at the expense of staff seeing their own families. However, children and young people in our houses have found this to be a positive experience, spending more time with adults they may often only see once or twice a week and helping to further develop positive relationships between children and the staff who support them. Children in the houses have also said they prefer less people coming and going. Our staff teams are now working a pattern of either 5 consecutive days on shift with 10 days off, or 7 consecutive days with 14 off. As a result, we have seen fewer challenges in the lives of our children at this time and are looking to see if this can become standard practice beyond the current crisis.

In our [fostering services](#) foster carers are continuing to support children in placements, with the support of our fostering team. Where necessary children are still being placed by local authorities in foster placements, and our foster carers continue to be able to provide safe new placements for children. Our fostering team have adapted to new ways of working; using technology to continue with fostering assessments, as well as holding virtual fostering panel meetings to make sure decisions on children's placements can be discussed and approved to avoid delays and disruption, which could otherwise be detrimental to a child's wellbeing.

Aberlour's [Sustain](#) services provide support to families whose children are on the 'edge of care' and are at risk of being accommodated. A relationship-based approach, focusing on families' strengths, capability building and community connections is key to working with families and keeping children at home. For families where child protection is a concern, maintaining contact, continuing to build positive relationships and ensuring services have sight of the children to make sure they are safe is paramount. In the absence of direct contact with families in their homes, working with families and planning with them what their support will look like during the COVID-19 pandemic, our Sustain services have developed an approach ensuring frequency of contact and communication with families so they continue to get support. This support is flexible and can be increased in frequency and contact via digital communications where a family feels they need it.


***"Thank you SO much to you and your managers for being so flexible and creative and continually having the very best interests of our families at the heart of what you do – it's quite exceptional and very much appreciated."  
(Social Worker, Fife)***



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## Keeping Families Connected to our Services

Our [family support services](#) have continued to change, adapt and develop the way we support families in the community. In some areas our staff teams are operating a daily, dynamic rota, to prioritise additional hours to provide direct support to the most vulnerable families. This has included providing and delivering thousands of food parcels to families across Scotland who are self-isolating and cannot leave the house, or many more who are struggling financially and cannot afford to provide meals for their children. Our family support services have continued to offer practical support, such as assisting parents to apply for benefits and supporting with shopping and budgeting. Using technology to continue to deliver group work, including cook groups, art groups and homework groups has been a vital way of maintaining routines and continuing to have contact with families and their children. For those families who do not have digital technology available and have needed some direct contact, family support workers have made time to visit families' homes to continue contact at a safe distance while maintaining appropriate social distancing measures.



*"I feel like everyone else now. So I feel less odd and not as pressured. I now realise what I have been doing to maintain daily routines for myself and my children - e.g. plan a time for getting out of bed, make sure I put clothes on each day, have planned meal time and activities - is a good thing and I am good at it." (Mother, Early Years Outreach)*

Working alongside local social work teams, family support workers are assisting with joint visits to families' home where there are child protection concerns and contributing to social work assessments. This crisis has seen a significant rise in domestic abuse reporting, and our family support services have had to respond to this increase in risk of domestic abuse with significant increase in referrals to services due to domestic abuse. In responding to this rise in referrals, services have had to develop ways of remotely supporting the non-abusing parent and children in the most challenging of circumstances. This impact of this can be significant and stressful on staff, as they support families on the phone continuously with little relief between calls.

Due to the anxiety and stress experienced by many families during this crisis, there has also been an increase in mental health concerns for many parents and their children. Our services have responded to this by providing a variety of ways families can get support and maintain contact with services, through providing direct one-to-one contact through digital technology, supporting online groups and activities and sharing helpful resources. Our [perinatal family support services](#) have developed online support groups for mums and a virtual Caring Cafe, continuing to ensure that vital befriending and peer support is available on a regular basis for those mums whose mental health is particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Family support workers and young people's workers have

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developed fitness video challenges, activity packs and arts and crafts resources to help maintain young people's mental and physical health and wellbeing.

*"Both myself and my husband are working from home so things are quite chaotic in the household, the group sessions are really helping and giving the kids something to look forward to. It's also great the challenges they're being set as it keeps them entertained"*  
*(Parent, Youthpoint Moray)*

Digital technology has been vital to maintaining contact and connections with families we work with. Addressing issues around digital inclusion 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 of the families we work with do not have access to devices, and those that do have devices can often experience significant issues with data and credit, and so where possible we have sourced and provided laptops, tablets and phones for families who need them to keep them connected and able continue to receive support.

During times of social distancing and social isolation, digital technology is also key in supporting effective child protection work and ensuring services have sight of children where there may be child protection concerns. Our approach to family support has shifted to ensure that support can be delivered online and through digital communications and video conferencing apps, wherever possible. As well as allowing the families to continue to receive support, and the welfare of the children to be monitored, we can make sure families have the appropriate devices, help maintain connections to wider family and communities and support access to online systems, including benefits. Digital technology and devices are also crucial to supporting children with their educational attainment during the COVID-19, as we have seen from our own work supporting families that not all schools are providing digital devices for pupils.

*"We totally understand that this is a particularly difficult and challenging time for everyone at Aberlour and know that, even in these most extraordinary circumstances, you will be a great help to those in the community who you work with. Huge thanks to you and your colleagues for all that you are doing to help people in our communities."* **Northwood Charitable Trust, one of our funders.**

## Alleviating the Impact of Poverty and Financial Hardship

We know that by putting more money in families' pockets, we can begin to alleviate the damaging toxic stress and anxiety that financial hardship creates and instead help families to thrive, not just survive. We have seen thousands of children and their families across Scotland experiencing significant levels of poverty due to the coronavirus

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outbreak. Whilst the situation is changing daily at present, the full-scale of the impact of coronavirus, particularly on the most vulnerable in our society, is yet to be fully quantified. We do see, however, that families already at breaking point are struggling to put food on their tables, are unable to pay energy bills or to meet the basic and essential needs for them and their children.

Through our Urgent Assistance Fund, we provide cash grants to help families with children 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 families anywhere in Scotland. The Fund awards cash grants to assist families with children or young people aged 21 and under. The cash grants help and assist with a range of basic needs, such as food, prepay power cards, 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 are directly related to the impact of this crisis. We have seen the number of applications to the fund increased by more than 1400%. On top of our own financial commitment of £100,000 to the Fund, our fundraising efforts have enabled us to raise more than £150,000 in just the last month. In addition, the Scottish Government has committed a further £100,000 from funding made available to Third Sector organisations to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on families' and communities' wellbeing.

As the coronavirus outbreak continues and the consequences are felt by children, young people and families across Scotland, we will continue to raise money for the Fund and to distribute it to those most affected financially and at risk of falling further into poverty. In addition to the Fund, we will also continue to provide what we can to families, such as food packages, children's clothing, play equipment, digital devices and data packages and other essential items. We are also working together with partner organisations and children's charities to make sure all necessary steps are taken by both the UK and Scottish Governments, and all available policy measures are implemented, to get money directly to the children, young people and families who are most at risk of the financial consequences of COVID-19, and of falling even further into poverty.

## Sarah' Story

Shortly after Sarah's baby was born, both became unwell and were rushed to intensive care for a week. After recovering, they were due to be discharged when it became apparent that Sarah had very little income and no support from family. That meant after paying her household bills and baby essentials, there wasn't enough money left to buy warm clothing. Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund came to the rescue for Sarah and her baby. It provided Sarah with a enough money to enable her to have food for her cupboards and freezer, warm clothes for her and her baby to minimise any repeat visits to hospital, and money for her gas and electricity meters.

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## Beyond COVID-19

The focus of Aberlour's work in response to the coronavirus crisis has been to meet the immediate and critical needs of the children, young people and families across Scotland who need our help and support to manage through this crisis. However, we must begin to think beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and to consider how we can start to plan to meet the needs of children, young people and families who have been touched in one way or another by the impact of coronavirus, as and when circumstances return to normal. Continued support for many more families than needed it previously will be required throughout and beyond this crisis. The resulting increase in poverty and financial hardship, mental health issues, child welfare and wellbeing concerns, domestic abuse, substance misuse, as well as the myriad additional problems for families which will have been precipitated, exacerbated and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, will impact long into the future.

There will be required careful consideration about how we continue to deliver services and provide support in communities and in families' homes. At Aberlour, the experience of how we have adapted services to deliver support digitally and remotely has given us a glimpse of what service delivery may look like in the future, and should make us mindful of what must be done to prevent against social and digital exclusion by ensuring all families have access to the appropriate technology, not as a luxury but as a necessity. There must also be some reflection 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.

The greatest consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be felt by the whole of society for a long time to come, is the financial impact. The unprecedented financial commitment from government in response to this crisis has highlighted just how ill prepared the current welfare system is for the financial shock we are experiencing and just how fragile many people's financial circumstances are, with the worst still to come for many. Poverty levels in Scotland will rise as a consequence, and it is now unlikely that child poverty targets set just a few years ago by the Scottish Government will be achieved. This gives us reason to reconsider our approach as a country to responding to child poverty, and the possibility that certain policy mechanisms and economic measures, such as universal basic income, which seemed unworkable before COVID-19, may now be the best route to future-proofing ourselves against any further crises in the years and decades to come.

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