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Corporate parenting in a pandemic: Considering the delivery and receipt of support to care leavers in Wales during Covid-19.

1. Introduction

In 2020, the emergence of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic significantly changed daily life for citizens across the UK. A series of 'lockdown' measures directed people to stay at home, restricting contact with other households and impacting on the availability of some goods and services (Institute for Government 2020). Despite political assertions that 'we are all in this together' (Sunak 2020), repeated concerns were raised about the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups. Withers (2020) predicted that individual experiences of the pandemic would be shaped by inequalities, reliance on public services and access to resources. Similarly, Patel et al (2020) contended that the health and well-being of individuals of lower socio-economic status would be disproportionately impacted by housing (overcrowding, poor condition and lack of outdoor space), employment (limited opportunities to work from home and unstable income) and engagement with health providers (including being more likely to present later with health concerns and poor relationships with health professionals).

Whilst recognised as a heterogeneous population (Mannay et al. 2019), care leavers are considered a vulnerable group. Young people often experience adversity both prior to, and as a result of, their care experience (Wade et al 2011; Barnes 2012). Having been in the care of the state, young people typically transition to independent living at an earlier age than their peers and without the social capital of a network of adults to call on for support (Welsh Government 2019; Children's Society 2020). Moreover, research findings have consistently shown care-experienced individuals are more likely to experience poor outcomes in areas such as health and well-being, housing, education, employment, and parenting (Allnatt 2019; Berridge et al 2015; Dixon 2008, Furnivall 2013; Mannay et al 2017; Meltzer 2003, 2004; NAO 2015; Wade et al 2011; Sebba et al 2015; Roberts et al. 2019).

Despite long-standing concerns regarding outcomes and inequality for care leavers, support provision for care leavers in the UK has been considered well-developed by international standards (Strahl et al. 2020). In an effort to address the support 'cliff edge', the abrupt cessation of state support after leaving care (Cameron et al. 2018), legislation provides that support remains available to care leavers up to the age of 21, or 25 for those in education or training (Welsh Government, 2018). **Moreover, the provision of state support for young people,**

both during care and whilst leaving care, is framed under the concept of corporate parenting. This is defined as the “collective responsibility of all those within local authorities to safeguard and promote the life chances of looked after children” (Welsh Government 2020b: 4). When making decisions for children and young people, elected members and officers of the local authority are directed to act in the same way “as any responsible and conscientious parents would act” (Welsh Government 2018:100), with responses “tailored to individual needs” and considered “good enough for my child” (2018: 109).

Local authorities are also required to develop Pathway Plans for young people leaving care (Welsh Government 2018). Designed to structure transitions to independence, these Pathway Plans require holistic consideration of young people’s needs and wishes, including areas such as health, accommodation, education, training and employment, relationships, and independent living skills - considering both practical as well as emotional support needs (Welsh Government 2018). Therefore, in principle, a child in care should be able to have the same expectations of support from their corporate parent as any other child.

Yet, despite these developments, questions have repeatedly been raised about the extent to which the state can act ‘in loco parentis’ (Bullock et al. 2006). For Hannon et al. (2010: 33) while “the ‘corporate’ dimension to the parenting role has been heavily invested in, with a particular focus on new guidelines, structures and safeguarding processes ... far less attention has been paid to parenting deficit in children’s lives”. An assertion supported by Brown et al. (2019) who highlighted that young people often **feel** that they are being cared for inadequately. Across Wales, local authority inspections have noted high aspirations for care-experienced children and young people, but also expressed concern that in some areas the “corporate parenting ethos was not sufficiently strong” (CIW 2019: 48).

Furthermore, efforts to secure the involvement and commitment of wider partners, beyond Children’s Services departments, was reported to be inconsistent (CIW 2019). **In recognition of the tendency to view corporate parenting as the responsibility of Children’s Services departments, rather than “a responsibility spanning the functions of the whole authority” the Welsh Government (2020b: 4) declared its intent to strengthen and extend corporate parenting commitments across public services. This included recognising the need for stronger partnership working with housing and education services, as well as highlighting the importance of engaging with health, policing and the justice system (Welsh Government 2020b).**

Whilst aspirations to improve corporate parenting remain on the policy agenda (CIW 2019; Welsh Government 2020b), the pandemic has impacted on the delivery of both adult and children social services, leaving professionals constrained in their practice responses (Welsh Government 2020a). Welsh Government (2020a) guidance emphasised that it was ‘imperative’ Pathway Plans continue to be developed and completed with the involvement of professionals and young people. Nonetheless, in recognition of the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, these aspirations were accompanied by the caveat ‘as is reasonably practicable’. This caveat was reflected in official guidance directed at Children’s Services to support young people remotely where possible, and risk-assess the need for face-to-face contact. There were also directives for practitioners to work in partnership with other agencies to “share information, avoid duplication and secure a shared understanding of need in relation to each individual child or care leaver” (Welsh Government 2020a: 8).

At present relatively little is known about state efforts to maintain support for care leavers during the pandemic, or how such support has been received and experienced. Arguably, mandated responsibilities could have provided some protection for care leavers, ensuring that they were “better placed than others to get through this [pandemic]” (Golightly and Holloway 2020: 637). Yet, pre-existing concerns about the capacity of the state to parent, combined with both constrained and pressured social services may have engendered further precarity and disadvantage.

In evidence generated with practitioners, managers, foster care providers and care experienced young people in Scotland, positive examples of practice were highlighted including the provision of emotional, financial, and practical support (Staf 2020). However, the Staf report also identified concerns in respect of loneliness, social exclusion, mental health, digital exclusion, food poverty, financial precarity and childcare provision for care-experienced parents; concerns which have been borne out in other empirical studies conducted both within and outside of the UK (Kelly et al. 2020; Larkins et al 2020; Lotan et al. 2020; Munro et al. 2021; NYAS 2020; O’Higgins et al. 2020; McGhee and Roesch-Marsh 2020).

This paper contributes to this developing evidence base by considering corporate parenting during the pandemic. The paper reports on a study funded by [REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW]. Drawing on survey data, the paper considers professional efforts to support care leavers during this time, together with interview data from care leavers themselves reflecting on the support available to them from their corporate parents.

2. The research study

A qualitative, mixed method study was designed which incorporated a survey of Welsh Local Authority professionals and interviews with care experienced young people in Wales and England.

Statutory social care professionals involved in the design, organisation, or delivery of support for care leavers during the pandemic (thereby targeting professionals of varying seniority) were invited to answer a series of open questions via an online survey tool. Surveys have proved an effective and efficient means of data collection in the pandemic (The Fostering Network 2020; Greeson et al. 2020; NYAS 2020; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2020) and were advantageous in adhering to the timescales of the study. Whilst it is important to reiterate that statutory social care professionals within Children's Services departments are not solely responsible for providing corporate parenting support, care leavers have identified these professionals as a key source of support (Briheim-Crookall et al. 2020) and they represent the 'closest embodiment' of young people's corporate parents (Rutman et al. 2002). As such, the availability and responses of leaving care teams and professionals in a context of widespread suspension or reduction in services and supports, was considered the primary source of support to young people.

The survey asked for details of new measures and adapted practice during the pandemic. Professionals were also invited to consider lessons for the future based on their recent experiences, including any practices they would recommend be retained after the pandemic, as well as areas for improvement in the event of further restrictions. Recruitment of professionals occurred via targeted emails sent to local authority services and members of the All Wales Leaving Care Forum. In total, 22 professionals participated from 10 local authorities in Wales; on average one response was received from the majority of local authorities (n=8), however one authority submitted three responses, another, four and another, seven.

As 'experts by experience' (Preston-Shoot 2007), the study was particularly interested in the perspectives of young people aged 17-25 who were entitled to support as a care leaver under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. Care leavers were invited to respond to questions about their experiences of the pandemic, via an individual interview (with the option of a supportive individual present), focus group or via email or text contribution. Creative

contributions such as songs, poems and artwork were also invited (see [REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW] for further details).

In total, 17 young people participated in the study from 12 local authorities in Wales. Again, one young person participated from each local authority in the majority of instances (n=8), two young people participated from three other authorities and a further authority was represented by three young people. The study also included data from five young people living in England [REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW]. As this paper considers corporate parenting in the Welsh context during the pandemic, the data from these young people is not included. The sample of care leavers from Wales was made up of three males and 14 females, aged between 17 and 22, with 10 living in independent accommodation, four in hostels, two with current/former foster carers and one temporarily living with her partner's family while waiting for suitable accommodation to be identified. Three young people took part in a focus group and 14 engaged in an individual interview. One young person also submitted artwork. Interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim. All data were analysed using an inductive and deductive approach, creating overarching thematic categories and analytical themes (Fereday, 2006).

Ethical approval was granted by Cardiff University's Social Research Ethics Committee. In accordance with Welsh Government restrictions at the time of data production (26th May – 14th July 2020), the research was conducted remotely. The sensitive nature of the research and the potential vulnerability of young people (Shaw and Holland 2014) was considered in the development of the study. In order to ensure continued access to support, young people were recruited via local authority and third sector professionals. These professionals were asked to identify potential participants and to distribute information sheets and consent forms. In the event that a young person expressed an interest, agreement was sought to pass their details to a member of the research team. In addition, a research advisory group made up of care-experienced young people were consulted at various points during the study. The advisory group approved the research design and validated the findings, confirming that they resonated with their experiences. They also informed the recommendations for policy and practice. This included a request to emphasise the importance of face-to-face support following the easing of restrictions and the importance of clearer signposting to alert young people to sources of support within and outside of office hours.

3. Study Findings

3.1 Corporate parenting in a pandemic: Seeking to ensure continued support and access to resources

This section presents the findings from the survey, detailing professional efforts to support young people during the pandemic. The survey findings provided a helpful foundation for subsequent contrast and comparison with young people's reported experiences. All of the professional responses emphasised the importance of maintaining a service for young people during the initial phases of the pandemic and highlighted efforts to keep in touch with care leavers. Adhering to working practice directives (Welsh Government 2020a), professionals repeatedly referred to remote and online forms of communication. As reported by **one respondent**:

Letters providing all the guidance were sent out to all young people advising them that they could contact the team for support. Social workers and PAs [personal advisors] maintain weekly contact via email, text, phone, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger. This will include WhatsApp video calls. A number of videos made by the team have been uploaded to the 16 plus Facebook page to provide regular updates about any changes to guidance, but also to remind young people that we are still available to support them.

Where deemed necessary due to identified risk and vulnerability, a minority of respondents highlighted the possibility of socially distanced face-to-face contact. However, in line with changes to social work practice more widely, remote forms of contact constituted routine practice (Ferguson et al 2020; Baginsky and Manthorpe 2020; Cook and Zschomler 2020). **The survey responses suggested that remote contact consisted** of both individual and group communications, delivered by practitioners or via electronic and postal modes.

Related to efforts to maintain contact with care leavers, professionals also highlighted efforts to ensure young people had access to sufficient resources. Ensuring young people had the necessary means to engage in remote contact formed part of this, with six out of the **22** respondents noting the provision of electronic items for young people, and/or funds to top-up phone credit or boost access to wi-fi. In other examples, professionals reported young people being provided with additional money (n=10) and supported with access to food (n=7), accommodation (n=4) gas and electricity (n=3) and toiletry provisions (n=1). One respondent noted,

'I have regular contact with [young people] and assist them with a variety of issues, such as finances, housing and ... those that have needed them have had regular food parcels delivered and ... and mobile top ups'.

While these responses addressed young people's needs in the immediate or short-term, two respondents also provided support geared towards longer-term access to resources, offering information and guidance related to future education, training, and employment.

In addition to considerations of practical needs, professionals described efforts to support young people's emotional well-being, for example,

'We contact all our care leavers for a weekly welfare and support [calls] by phone, text, Whats App and email ... we check in with them to see how they are coping and how we could make their experience nicer'.

Related to this were efforts to engage young people in online groups or forums (n=8), which sought to involve young people in activities such as quizzes, art sessions and cooking, and provided opportunities to connect with other young people, share experiences and offer peer support. Professionals also referred to measures intended to show care and combat boredom. One respondent noted young people being sent an afternoon cream tea box, while another stated their authority had offered a temporary Netflix subscription. Furthermore, three participants commented on the provision of 'activity' or 'survival' packs for young people which included books (puzzle, colouring, self-help), pencils, planting seeds, sweets, face masks, bath bombs and / or notepads. One respondent commented that *'gestures like this will help with mental health'*.

Despite the initial challenges of moving to remote support, the majority of respondents highlighted benefits to the new way of working as it enabled more efficient, frequent, and meaningful contact with young people, as one respondent stated:

[The] quality of communication with young people has been much more successful due to working from home thus having quality time to "get in touch" and with non-engagers and converse for longer periods, rather than "running around" to meetings, reviews, visits etc stuck in traffic.

Several respondents reported wanting to retain some practices after the pandemic including greater use of online meetings and forums.

Young people have responded very well the social media and digital communication. It would be beneficial to keep this going and look at other social media platforms to engage young people.

Some participants also reflected on the perceived benefits of more regular check-in with young people:

'It has been learnt that even a ten-minute conversation every week helps build a healthy trustworthy relationship with your young person, and it is something that I would like to continue with even after life returns to normal'.

Yet, despite efforts to respond to practical and emotional support needs, some survey responses also highlighted constraints in support practices and provision:

Care leavers like face-to-face communication and this has been significantly reduced - many report feeling lonely and disconnected – [it is] particularly hard for single mums with children in a rural area who feel isolated and alone, scared of using public transport, have limited social media contact.

Additionally, a lack of suitable accommodation options for young people and limited resources, inhibited efforts to ensure access to technology and respond to young people's needs more widely (n=8). One respondent reported:

During this time I feel that care leavers have been marginalised and discriminated against by society and government policy as a whole. The local authority has been fantastic in looking how to meet people's needs during a difficult time, whilst working against social discrimination and lack of resources from central government.

The survey findings provide helpful insights into professional practice during the pandemic, including efforts to maintain support for care leavers and holistically consider support needs, within a context of restrictive working practices (Welsh Government 2020). Importantly, concerns about the vulnerabilities of care leavers, particularly in regard to isolation and loneliness (Baginsky and Manthorpe 2020; NYAS 2020), as well as heightened disadvantage resultant from the 'digital divide' (McGhee and Roesch-Marsh 2020) were echoed by professionals in this study. These findings also have some resonance with good practice recommendations for supporting care leavers during the pandemic, including efforts to

maintain regular contact and holistically respond to young people's needs (Coram Voice 2020; 1st International Care Leavers Convention 2020). The findings correspond with reports of creative efforts to provide emotional, financial, and practical support to care leavers (Munro et al. 2021; Staf 2020)

However, it is important to note that there was variation between survey responses and the findings presented cannot be assumed to be reflective of all leaving care professionals and teams across Wales. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that respondents were largely positive about individual and local efforts to support young people. The survey findings suggest that professionals and teams sought to be 'good' corporate parents, maintaining support for young people and responding both pragmatically and thoughtfully in the challenging circumstances.

In their discussion of parenting, Cameron and Maginn (2009:22) make a helpful distinction between 'caring for' and 'caring about':

Parenting involves more than those activities that ensure a child's survival ... 'caring for' is not the same as 'caring about' and while the former can mean providing the physical necessities of life, like safety, food, clothes, warmth and somewhere to sleep, the process of 'caring about' demands a subtle form of parental involvement that includes availability, thoughtfulness, responsibility, guidance and emotional investment.

This distinction between 'caring for' and 'caring about' is helpful in considering the survey findings. Responses described efforts to ensure young people's access to 'necessities' such as money, food, accommodation and technology. Yet despite sometimes feeling thwarted in their efforts due to limited resources, the findings suggest that some corporate parents went beyond statutory obligations to 'care for' young people. More akin to notions of 'caring about' (Cameron and Maginn 2009), there is some evidence to suggest that professionals sought to be readily available to young people, responsive to their needs and supportive of their well-being.

The professional survey data offered valuable insights into corporate parenting responses during the pandemic and provided a helpful foundation from which to consider the experiences of care leavers. The presentation of young people's data in the following section will focus specifically on corporate parenting support and is structured in accordance with the reporting of the professionals' findings, with reference to the continuity of support during the pandemic and the practical and emotional help available. Whilst the scope of this paper does not allow for in-depth consideration of young people's experiences, (these are reported in more detail

elsewhere, see [REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW]) it should be noted that young people disclosed a range of challenges over the course of the study, which included physical and mental health difficulties, education and employment cessation, unsafe and unsuitable accommodation, financial worries, parenting challenges and losses in respect of routines and social connections. Despite young people in our sample developmentally transitioning to adulthood and independence (REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW), such experiences of hardship and adversity reconfirmed the need for on-going corporate parenting support.

3.2 In receipt of corporate parenting in a pandemic: Expectations of parents and the fit between needs and resources

Young people reported varied experiences of contact with corporate parents during the pandemic. Some young people were positive about efforts to maintain contact and support despite the challenging situation. For example, Tom talked about ‘*getting help from my PA, my personal advisor, she’s helping me a lot*’ while Jess stated:

..my social worker, she phones me regularly ... she actually Facetimed me the other week actually. She’s amazing, ... She keeps it quite regular cos she knows I can get down quite easily... So yeah she keeps in touch quite regular. (Jess)

Describing this relationship in more detail, Jess continued:

She’ll ask me what I’ve been up to, how am I feeling on the inside, if I’ve had any concerns, if everything is ok at home. Obviously, cos if I’ve got any concerns then I’ve got to mention it. And we just talk basic stuff like she’ll always ask about my nan and yeah we’ll talk about college, if I’m nervous or not. Sometimes she’s helped me out with [education course], so she’s always there for like a helping hand really. (Jess)

Jess’s comments suggest a close trusting relationship with her social worker, someone who demonstrated a knowledge of and interest in her life, who encouraged her to express her feelings and was responsive to her needs.

Dylan also reported more frequent contact with professionals and stated they had helped him cope with the sudden loss of routines and services. This involved individual, tailored support sessions as well as group activities including cooking, quizzes, and painting by numbers. In

his interview Dylan disclosed long standing mental health difficulties and had initially struggled to cope with the abrupt cancellation of his college course and the loss of his mental health support.

I feel that being able to speak to my keyworker more and the [third sector organisation] crew, that did help. It was almost like they took the place of a therapist in a way.... I think the level of support I got was excellent. I didn't feel forgotten or left behind.

(Dylan)

Aligning with Jess's comments, Dylan's reflections suggest professionals were responsive to his needs and were able to counteract deteriorations in mental health and well-being through increased contact and demonstrative interest and care.

Positive reflections about corporate parents were not only restricted to young people in receipt of regular support. For example, Anna reflected that although she did not need specific help from her personal advisor, she appreciated receiving texts during the pandemic as this served as a reminder that someone was available if needed and that she was 'kept in mind'. As argued by Maginn (2016), for children and young people in care 'little things matter and will be noticed and remembered'. At the other end of the spectrum, for young people in crisis, the support of corporate parents had the potential to be crucial. For example, Bethan reported being thankful for the support of her personal advisor when she had to unexpectedly move during lockdown:

She made sure like, I had enough food and stuff, she helped me financially, emotionally and obviously like when I was moving out and stuff, I was pretty suicidal she helped me there as well. You know, she was just making sure that I was okay on a day-to-day basis. She came out to see me nearly every day. **(Bethan)**

Bethan's comments provide an example of face-to-face contact being deemed necessary because of the high-risk situation (Welsh Government 2020b). Her comments illustrate the importance of corporate parents for young people with limited social networks. The provision of both practical and emotional support was imperative for Bethan in getting her to more suitable accommodation and supporting through her a difficult period.

These reflections establish some consistency with the survey findings where professionals reported efforts to ensure continued contact and respond to practical as well as emotional needs. The comments of these young people resonate with notions of both 'caring for' and 'caring about' (Cameron and Maginn 2009). Accordingly, corporate parenting support could be a

lifeline to young people in securing necessities such as food, finances, and accommodation. Yet in addition to responding to essential needs, relationships with professionals also had the potential to communicate interest, availability and concern, factors recognised and appreciated by young people.

Other young people were more critical of corporate parenting support. This included young people who reported no contact from local authority professionals during the pandemic. For example, Paul discussed the inaccessibility of his social worker:

I've tried ringing everyone in the office, but I still can't get hold of my social worker to this day. I haven't spoken to him in 5, 6 months my social worker, something like that.

Researcher: Have you had any help form the local authority at all?

Nothing at all. (Paul)

In contrast to the examples where corporate parents were reported to be proactive in their efforts to contact young people, Paul was unable to access advice and support despite repeated attempts. Aged 18 and living alone, Paul experienced financial hardship in the pandemic after being required to self-isolate and be absent from his employment. In his interview he discussed how financial support and food provision would have improved his experience. However, his problematic relationship with the local authority, which pre-dated the pandemic, left him feeling neither 'cared for' nor 'cared about' by his corporate parents (Cameron and Maginn 2009).

Amy also reported a lack of contact and support from the local authority and suggested that her lack of contact with the leaving care team was because she did not have an allocated worker:

I don't actually have a PA [personal advisor], I did have one but [she left following a period of maternity leave] ... They were on about finding a replacement but I haven't heard nothing back off that.... I have to go through the team manager, with any like problems, or if I need help or anything... (Amy)

Amy's comments do not necessarily suggest that corporate parenting support was unavailable, but that the nature of the relationship was such that the onus was on her to initiate contact and request support. Such a relationship seems inconsistent with notions of corporate parenting

seeking to replicate the care ‘good’ parents would seek to provide (Courtney 2009), rather it depicts a passive and distant corporate parent. In contrast, the importance of corporate parents keeping children in mind, checking in with young people to make sure they were okay was repeatedly highlighted by participants in our study. Young people acknowledged and appreciated this support when it happened, as evidenced in the comments at the start of this section, but it was also keenly missed when unavailable:

I could have died and they would not know. I have only had two check-ups, I could’ve killed myself, I could have had a breakdown, not eaten, I could’ve got ill and been in hospital and they wouldn’t know. They wouldn’t know where I was and they’d only find out when eventually they start ringing me and I wouldn’t answer – probably a couple of weeks later. (Mary)

I’ve had one or two texts but only [that], I haven’t spoken to her, just a text and email ... It would be nice that they checked that I was alive to be honest, you know? (Bev)

*I’ve got a social worker, she doesn’t bother with me that much to be completely honest. ... Obviously they’ve said **we’re** on the other end of the phone but its only [youth worker] that’s messaged me to see if I’m okay. [PA] hasn’t messaged me to see if I’m okay, nor does [social worker] and I just feel like they should ...if I had that that would actually make my day that’s something I haven’t had ... Just that I’ve got somebody there that I know is checking up on me. (Lyndsay)*

Similar to Amy’s example, these comments do not suggest that corporate parenting support was unavailable but that it was incongruent with young people’s expectations. The comments stand in sharp contrast to those above where young people described professionals as being available, responsive in such times of crisis and demonstrating emotional warmth (Cameron and Maginn 2008). Again, these accounts invite comparison with descriptions of corporate parenting as: ‘a legal and moral duty to provide the kind of support that any good parent would provide for their own children’ (Courtney 2009: 4). For these young people, infrequent and / or impersonal messages reminding them they were available or inviting them to get in touch if needed, did not match with their ideas of ‘good’ parents and failed to communicate a sense of

professionals being interested and concerned for their wellbeing. Such findings chime with the potential for contrasting understandings of care between young people, social workers, and carers (Brown et al. 2019).

As well as variation in levels of professional interest and concern, differing responses were also observed in relation to the nature of support available. For example, despite feeling professionals ‘*didn’t bother with her that much*’, Lyndsay reported her social worker and personal advisor actively searching for more suitable accommodation during the pandemic and seeking to provide her with the means to engage with educational activities:

Yeah my PA [personal advisor] did buy me a laptop to do some work on and stuff for college so I’ve still got that now and I do work with [youth worker] on, I do my bitesize and that. (Lyndsay)

Efforts to ensure access to technology and online education, as well as the challenges of accessing suitable accommodation are consistent with the survey findings and wider literature (Kelly et al. 2020; McGhee and Roesch-Marsh 2020; Munro et al. 2021). Yet while professionals may have demonstrated ‘caring for’ Lyndsay, they fell short of notions of ‘caring about’ and the lack of relational connection with the social worker and personal advisor undermined the extent to which she felt supported.

In other examples, young people’s dissatisfaction with corporate parents reflected a disconnect between support needs and corporate parent responses. Jemma reported having to unexpectedly move out of her foster care placement during the lockdown:

I have gone from a foster placement where I had everything, [to] going into a hostel where basically had to do my cooking, shopping, budgeting, and all this, where I haven’t been taught anything. Yeah my PA [personal advisor] helped me move but now I have moved and settled in, I pretty much have no support whatsoever. (Jemma)

While Jemma’s needs in relation to moving to new accommodation were met, the loss of her foster family was not acknowledged, nor were her practical and emotional needs responded to as she adjusted to independent living. In another example, Mary also felt her needs were only partially met. Whilst she was very appreciative of the extra financial support provided by her local authority (an additional £15 a week), she had been unable to access other help due to living outside of her local authority area:

I'm in [local authority of residence], but if I was in [local authority of origin] possibly prescriptions being picked up, food parcels being dropped off but because I'm in [local authority of residence] then I couldn't get that. ... I'm still based in [local authority of origin leaving care team]. Social services have not transferred me down here so all my links are up there and I can't obviously get down there. So it's been very stressful.

(Mary)

The provision of additional support would have been valuable for Mary as she had long-standing mental health difficulties, which were exacerbated by repeated problems accessing medication and abrupt cancellations of therapeutic support. Having lived in a different local authority to her corporate parents, she was unable to access certain support. Considered alongside Amy above who did not have an allocated worker, these accounts highlight the potential for some care leavers to experience additional disadvantage and barriers to corporate parenting support.

Julie was also living outside of her local area, and she described a difficult relationship with her corporate parents. Julie repeatedly tried to initiate contact with the leaving care team and believed they were both disingenuous in their communication and unresponsive to her needs.:

*I said I'm struggling with my anxiety and my depression. She [personal advisor] goes 'well that's what we're here for, that's what we're here to help you with'. **(Julie)***

Despite such reassurances, Julie reported financial hardship and stated she was unable to purchase sufficient provisions of food, gas and electricity.

*I haven't got credit on my phone, I've only got texts ... I ain't got the money to even top my phone up... I've got unlimited texts now so I just keep texting people, asking them to call me, and then they don't bother calling me, so that's one thing that pisses me off about social services, especially through this thing right, they say 'if you need anything just, we'll help you, just ring us or text us, and we'll help you'! **(Julie)***

Julie's comments stand in sharp contrast to more positive depictions of corporate parents, where local authority professionals were described as interested, concerned and responsive to young people. Julie was also living outside of the local authority responsible for providing corporate parenting support. It is unclear the extent to which this, limited resources and / or other factors, impacted on her experience. Nevertheless, her reports of disingenuous

responses from supporting professionals, meant failures to attend to her individual needs and left her feeling neither ‘cared for’ or ‘cared about’ (Cameron and Maginn 2009).

4. Strengths and limitations

The findings presented in this paper represent one of the few studies to consider delivery and receipt of corporate parenting in a pandemic. Despite limited timescales and funding, the breadth of participation is a strength of the research, with contributions from young people and professionals from 16 of the 22 local authorities in Wales. This helped generate a nuanced data set that makes a much-needed contribution to the evidence base.

Nonetheless, before drawing conclusions from the study, several limitations need to be acknowledged. The reach and size of our sample could have been extended to have captured the full range of support responses or experiences. There was diversity across professional responses and there were differences in the support provisions and practices reported but the extent to which reported practices were representative of those within or across statutory social care departments areas cannot be assumed. In addition, broader participation of professionals from across local authorities and public services would have provided valuable insights into wider corporate parenting awareness and consideration of care leavers’ needs during the pandemic.

Furthermore, young people were recruited via local authority and third sector organisations. Whilst this was important in managing ethical concerns and adhering to the time constraints of the study, this sample may insufficiently reflect the experiences of young people less engaged or connected to such support. The timing of the study is important, the research commenced approximately nine weeks into the initial ‘lockdown’ and at a time when initial restrictions were beginning to ease. It is possible that both professional responses and young people’s reflections may have changed in response to the repeated restrictions and enduring nature of the pandemic.

5. Discussion

This paper considered corporate parenting in a pandemic, with reference to both professional practice and care leavers’ experiences. Positively, the findings illustrated aspects of ‘good’

corporate parenting, even in the unprecedented circumstances of a pandemic. There was some consistency between professional notions of good practice and young people's expectations of 'good' corporate parenting. At the heart of this were professionals who recognised their corporate parenting responsibilities, who were pro-active in contacting young people, who understood their needs and situations, and who were willing and able to respond meaningfully. Our findings demonstrated how relationships were central to young people's reflections; regardless of whether they were in crisis or coping well, living with others or alone, they appreciated professionals who showed interest and concern for their well-being and conveyed to them that they were available and could be relied on.

However, this was not the experience of all or even the majority of young people in our study. While there was some evidence of synergy between the perspectives of professionals and young people, there was also evidence of disconnect between professionals' reporting of practice and young people's experiences. Some young people struggled in unsuitable conditions, without basic necessities or services, whilst facing overwhelming future uncertainty (see [REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW]). Such diversity of responses and experiences within our relatively small sample, provide little reassurance of equitable support provision either within or across local authority boundaries.

Corporate parenting relies on commitment to care leavers at national, local, and individual levels (Bullock et al. 2006) and in an effort to learn from both the successes and failures highlighted within this study, it is necessary to consider contributions to corporate parenting at each of these levels. For example, corporate parenting is shaped by national policies that set expectations of care provision, which are bolstered or undermined by the commitment of resources. Our findings support on-going efforts to review, broaden and strengthen corporate parenting responsibilities (Welsh Government 2020a). Responding effectively and efficiently to young people's diverse needs (such as accommodation, mental health support, food provision, employment and education advice and financial assistance) cannot be achieved by Children's Services alone. Additionally, whilst the expectation to maintain support provision to care leavers was made explicit by the Welsh Government (2020b), the absence of additional dedicated funds to support care leavers arguably constrained parenting responses. In this way, the findings of our study raise concerns for young people's current difficulties, as well as the potential for longer-term, compounded disadvantage.

At a local level, our findings demonstrate the influence of senior and middle managers in shaping corporate parenting responses, setting expectations of practice, and coordinating delivery of support. Survey findings suggested some organisational efforts to respond creatively to young people, combining both personal and remote forms of communication and coordinating efforts with third sector and youth service partners. Despite this, our study also highlighted varied support responses, with some young people left floundering in challenging circumstances, unclear about or unable to access support. The potential for some young people to be doubly disadvantaged by virtue of not having an assigned a worker or living outside of the local area was particularly problematic. Moreover, abrupt cessations to mental health provision, inappropriate housing provision and problematic experiences accessing education, lend support for ongoing efforts to strengthen and extend corporate parenting commitments (Welsh Government 2020b).

Finally, the study highlighted the importance of individual social care practitioners in the pursuit of good corporate parenting and reconfirms the importance of these key professionals. Despite directives to work in partnership with other agencies and ‘avoid duplication’ (Welsh Government 2020b), young people had expectations of social workers and personal advisors regardless of whether they were supported by other professionals. As the ‘closest embodiment’ of their corporate parents (Rutman et al 2002) young people frequently drew comparisons between their experiences of care and corporate parenting, with expectations and ideas of ‘good’ parents. Regardless of their circumstances, the care leavers in our study had expectations of their social workers and personal advisors, to get in touch, to stay in touch and to behave genuinely and responsively.

Our findings resonate with previous studies which emphasise young people’s desire for love and support, as well as guidance and boundaries (Dixon et al. 2015), who wish for professionals to see them as more than a contractual obligation, who respect their growing independence but also recognise their continued vulnerabilities (Rogers 2011), who are willing to go ‘above and beyond’ and ‘be there no matter what’ (Brown et al. 2019). Whilst we fully recognise the constrained and challenging context within which professionals were responding to young people, it is important not to downplay the extent to which individual social care professionals impacted on young people’s experiences. Where workers demonstrated ‘authentically warm caring’ (Cameron and Maginn 2008: 1168), understood, and were responsive to young people’s needs, they positively influenced experiences and provided some relief from hardship and adversity. Yet where this was not achieved, either practically or emotionally, young people’s

difficulties were compounded. Too often young peoples' lived realities fell short of their expectations. Yet, far from being unfair or unrealistic, such expectations are likely shared by many individuals, who similarly expect and are reliant on the practical, emotional, and financial support of their parents (Moreno 2012). Such expectations and reliance are arguably intensified in the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic and the impact and consequences of 'good' or 'poor' corporate parenting have the potential to be more keenly felt as young people's opportunities to source comfort and support from other means are severely constrained.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a unique lens through which to consider the role of the state as parent. Whilst evidence of good practice in Wales is encouraging, with some young people feeling both practically and emotionally supported, it is deeply concerning that other young people remained in precarious situations, feeling forgotten and neglected by their corporate parents. The findings of this study illustrate the propensity of corporate parenting to provide protection against the adversities of the pandemic, but also to compound young people's difficulties by being inactive, unresponsive and/or uncaring.

At a time of unprecedented change and challenge, this paper has illuminated the strengths, flaws and opportunities for further development of corporate parenting. The key conclusions are neither unique nor novel; simply that relationships matter, as do resources. The findings lend support to on-going efforts to strengthen and extend corporate parenting commitments (Welsh Government 2020b) but also serve as a reminder of the importance of statutory social care workers communicating and responding to young people in ways which are "tailored to individual needs" and would be considered "good enough for my child" (2018: 109).

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