Highland Children and Young People's Forum

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Letters from Lockdown

Preliminary Report

August 2020

Drawing by Alastair age 7

Foreword from Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

"COVID-19 has been the biggest human rights challenge we have faced in a long time and it has had a disproportionate impact on children. They have made incredible sacrifices over the lockdown period - putting public health first. Children have followed the rules in order to keep us all safe. This has come at a cost to their education, their ability to socialise and see family and friends, and to receive support through their school and community. Despite the challenges, children were a huge source of inspiration to us all during lockdown, their humour, compassion, inquisitive nature, and instinctive sense of empathy and community provided valuable lessons which should be at the heart of post-lockdown decision making.

Children's voices and experiences were largely been absent from decision making at the early stages of the pandemic, which makes this *Letters from Lockdown* project from the Highland Children and Young People's Forum so important.

Children have been real heroes throughout this crisis, not just in protecting public health, but also in building community spirit and focusing attention on what we can all do to help others. This project highlights a lot of positives: time with family, an appreciation of the importance of nature and getting outside, and of how lucky we are to live in Scotland. Children's education during lockdown focused less on formal structured learning, but included learning new skills and having new experiences. We need to make sure that we reinforce those positive experiences.

Letters from Lockdown also highlights the negative impacts: the loss of connection, the impact on mental health, bereavement, poverty and social exclusion. Children have shown incredible resilience, but even the most resilient children will need extra support.

Listening to children's experiences, and including them in decision making, has to be a key part of our response not just to this pandemic, but to building better communities and a better world."

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Drawing by Bec age 7

Introduction

In response to the lockdown announced by the Prime Minister on 23rd March, Highland Children and Young People's Forum sought a way to listen to children and young people's experiences. While the Forum usually concentrates its work on children and young people with additional support need, it was recognised that this was a time of crisis that would alter the needs of every child and young person. The invitation therefore went out to all children.

The idea to write to future children was to enable children and young people to think of a time beyond the current lockdown, reinforcing the idea that this time will pass. The fact that we are living in an historical moment, one whose significance will be taught in the future was also a reminder that however tough things might be, we are all playing a part in a global initiative to save lives.

The Letters from Lockdown competition was launched. Children and young people were able to send a letter in any format. Letters in both hard and soft copy were sent plus drawings, photos, collages, slide shows, video, books. Originally there was only to be three categories, pre-school, primary and secondary. However, the large quantity of entries from primary school led to that age group being split into two. Every child received a personalised response.

This report includes some of the art work and quotes from the competition. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms have been provided, chosen alphabetically as they occur in the report.

The letters from lockdown will be put into an online resource for educationalists to provide a record of this time, as shared by children and young people, to become a legacy for future children.

The prize money has been donated in memory of Audrey Bowie. Audrey had her childhood rudely interrupted by the second world war and was evacuated to America via a Hoover employee evacuation programme. She made a recording about this experience for her grandchildren, which will be included in the online resource as a contrast to a different time. Audrey loved to give children a special day or outing. The first prizes for each age group will be for up to four people to attend a Highland activity of choice, (e.g. activity centre or boat trip). Second prize vouchers will also be given. The Forum is grateful to Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Children and Young People who is judge for the competition.

Analysis of the Letters

Over the three months from April to June, 185 children and young people took part. 4 entries were received from pre-school, 55 entries from children in primaries 1-3 (or up to 8 years old if age rather than class given), 101 entries from children in primary 4-7 and 25 entries from secondary aged young people. Primary aged entries were split into p1-3 and p4-7 for all entries that indicated the class; if only an age was given, 8 years olds were placed in the p1-3 group, although some of them may have been in p 4. Only four of the children/young people self-identified as having additional support needs.

It should be noted that the children and young people who submitted entries are likely to be amongst the most engaged: they chose to take part. Some teachers set the task amongst online learning and so some may have responded to that. However, it is reasonable to suppose that those children and young people who do not have good access to online learning; who do not have support from parents at home; who are coping with family stress or dysfunction or who have increased caring or other responsibilities, might not have been motivated to take part. It is reasonable therefore to consider that these responses represent the more positive experiences of lockdown.

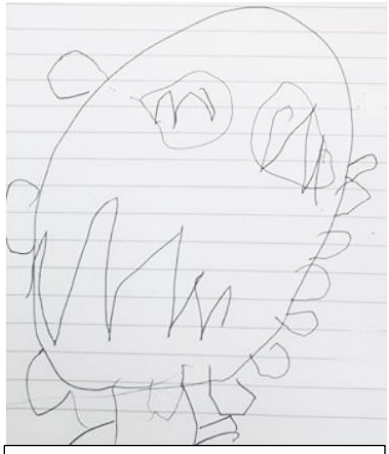
Scroll from Diane age 8

The variety of style and media of the letters was analysed by noting similar categories of commentary amongst the letters. Pre-school entries were not analysed in the same way as are there were only 4. All letters were initially read and replied to which provided headings for the categories of descriptions: understanding of current Covid-19 crisis; changes brought by lockdown; activities undertaken; things missed; positives of lockdown; feelings during lockdown and life post-lockdown. Each letter was checked and later rechecked to note which aspects of each of these categories were described. All charts included in this report are of percentages of entries for each age group commenting on that particular issue. Discussion of each category is developed from those percentages and the feeling and tone of the letters which provided context to those issues. The discussion should be read taking into account that these entries probably represent the best lockdown experience and say little about the worst

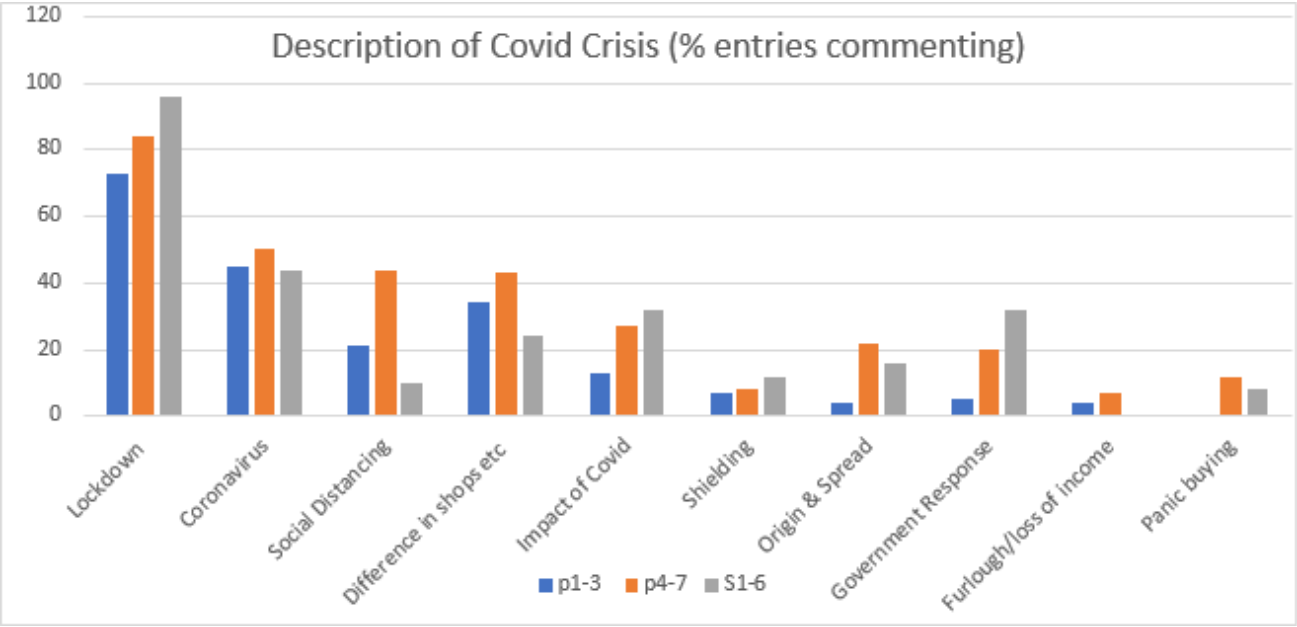
Description of Covid-19 Crisis

Even the pre-school children had some understanding of why they were in lockdown.

Understanding of "bad germs", hand washing and not being able to see people was shown. One entry had developed an imaginary story around it, another described "Super Germy", a bad germ which a witch had changed into a superhero to fight the other bad germs (which seems to describe the idea of vaccination even if the child did not realise this).



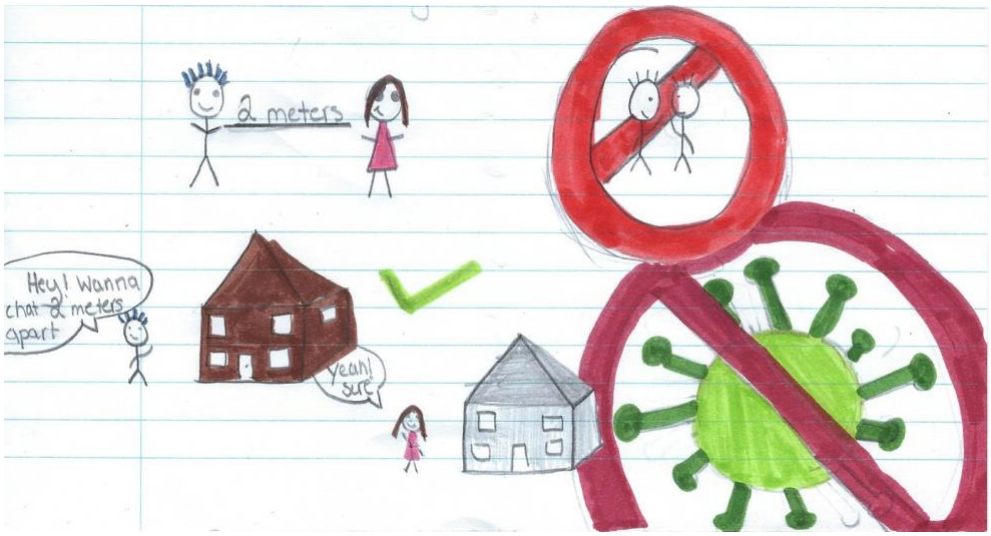
Bad Germ by Edward age 4



All ages described aspects of the lockdown. As this was in the title of the competition this is expected. Primary 4-7 children focused more than other age groups on the rules of social distancing and the difference in shops, cinemas etc. Older young people made more comments on the impact of Covid-19, including death rates, shielding and the government response, with much interest in news, policy making, scientists working on a vaccine, furlough and loss of income.

"I find lockdown quite scary as this disease can affect anyone and seeing the numbers of people who have the coronavirus and how many people have died from it, is frightening. I understand why we have to stay at home but I can't wait for when we are free to travel again." Erin aged 13

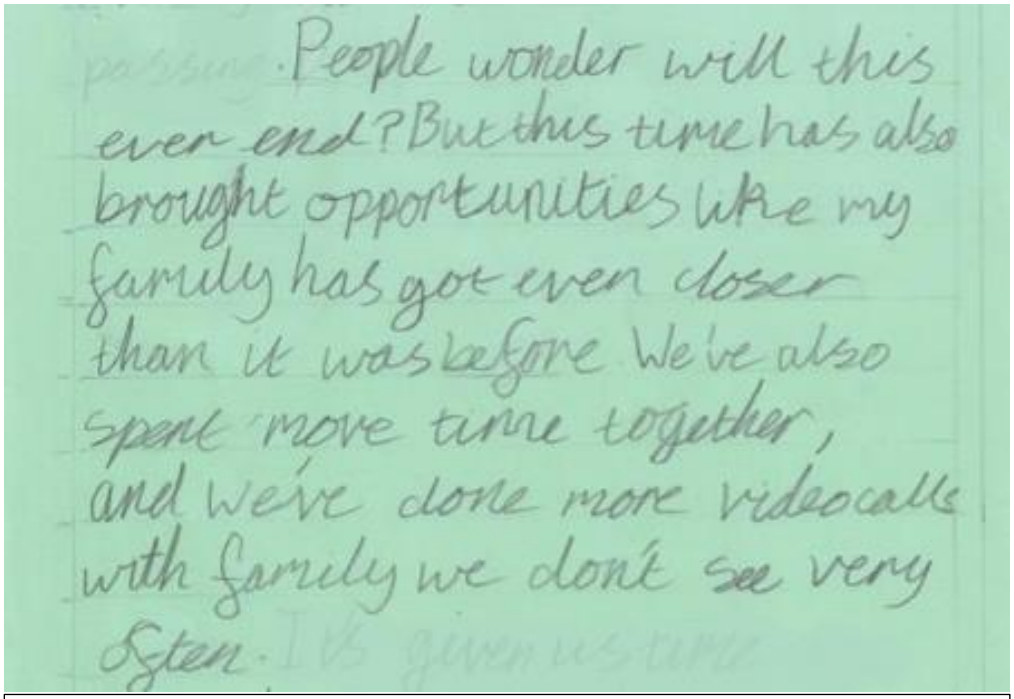
Description of lockdown changes



Drawing by Fiona (primary)

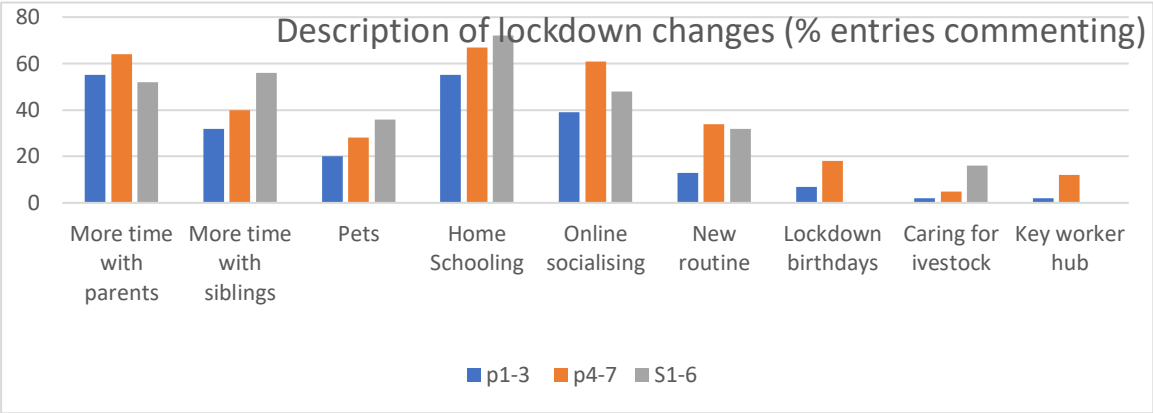
All age groups noted that lockdown meant more time with parents and siblings. For most this was a positive. Pets were also seen as important for many, perhaps especially for those who did not have siblings.

"I have a brother Toby he is my big fluffy golden retriever. I play with him every day in the field and he sleeps in my room every night and he lies there when I'm doing my school work wondering when it's break. It's really comforting him being there. He's an amazing brother, friend."
Gordon age 11


People wonder will this ever end? But this time has also brought opportunities like my family has got even closer than it was before We've also spent more time together, and we've done more videocalls with family we don't see very often.

Quote by Gill age 10

Home schooling was described in some detail by many of the children and young people. There were mixed views. Some hated it, some loved it and most liked aspects of it, particularly not needing to get up early and put on a uniform. The opportunity to see their teacher and peers on Google meet or other platforms was seen as essential. Most teachers had provided a range of activities primary children could choose from. Young people from secondary noted that the work seemed quite easy to begin with but got much harder. Concentration was becoming more difficult too as time in lockdown went on.



"Doing school work at home, for me, has been so much better than being in a classroom full of people and not being able to concentrate. I don't have to feel so anxious all the time and I can actually get on with my work. I feel like i have learnt so much in such a short amount of time. Covid-19 has made me smart!" Helen age 14

"Online school isn't it for me it just doesn't give me satisfaction of getting help and talking to friends anymore and it has brought me to a horrible place mentally and I just don't want it just now." Iain (secondary)

"Since lockdown my learning activities have slumped and nowadays whenever i'm doing schoolwork all i can think about is getting it done and playing online with my friends. Because of this I get things wrong which I would do easily if I was focused." Jacob (P6)

"I have a private chat with my teacher and I try to talk to her every day. I also send her pictures of most of my work, so she can see, and one day I received a postcard from her, which was nice, and my friends also gave me a letter, so it's good to know that people are still trying." Karen age 11

"Sometimes I go to … school hub, but only when my mum is working because she is a key worker a nurse. A special taxi … takes us to the hub until mum finishes work. …it is not like normal school, we play games and only do our online school work if we want to." Linda age 8

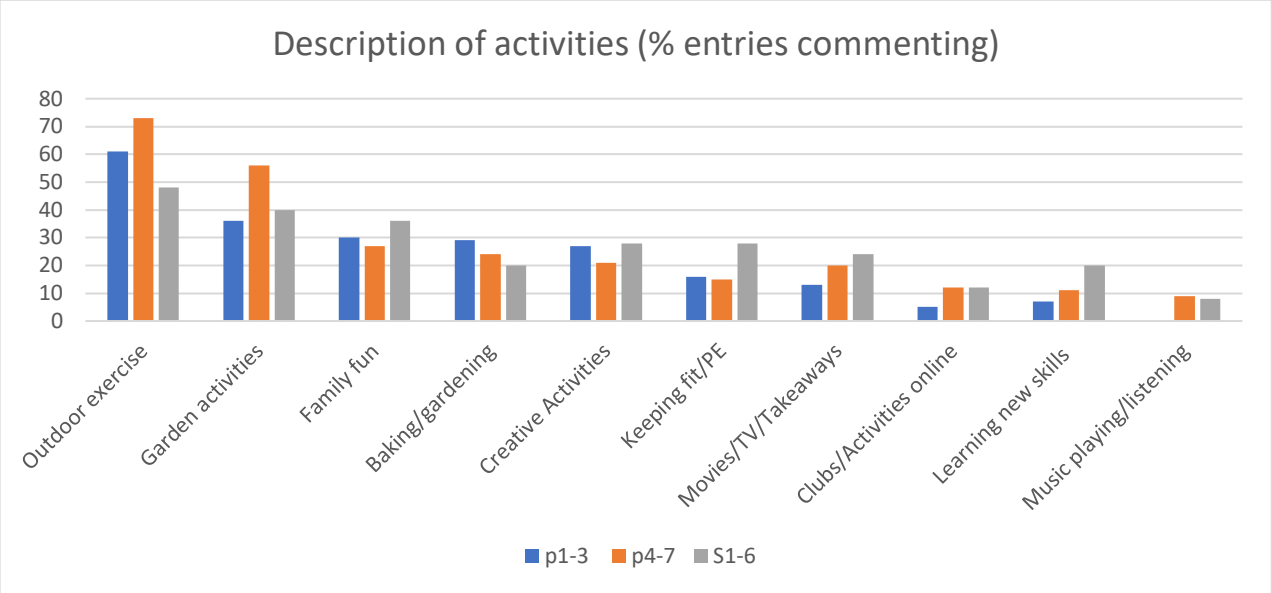
Description of Activities

Drawing by Melissa age 7

The activities undertaken by children and young people in lockdown were many and varied. Baking and gardening seemed to be favourites. Many had learned new life skills such as laundry or cooking; some had done woodwork making dens or benches or helping build sheds.

The outdoor time for exercise was mentioned the most by everyone, but was especially popular with the p4-7 group. Bikes and scooters featured, along with walks and river swims. Many of the clubs that children and young people attended had moved online, with dancing, gymnastics, music lessons and more being offered online. Keeping fit was listed particularly by young people. Music and creative activities were important too.

Treats were important: barbecues, takeaways, movie nights, garden camping and online family quizzes or parties were all mentioned frequently.



"Online classes and video calls with teachers are alright but I do miss being able to see my friends nearly every day. We have been video calling family who live all around the UK which we wouldn't usually do. This has made me realised how much spare time everyone has now that they are not working. I made a huge quiz for my family to play…This was really fun. I have realised that people are outdoor more going for walks and cycles including myself." Norma age 16

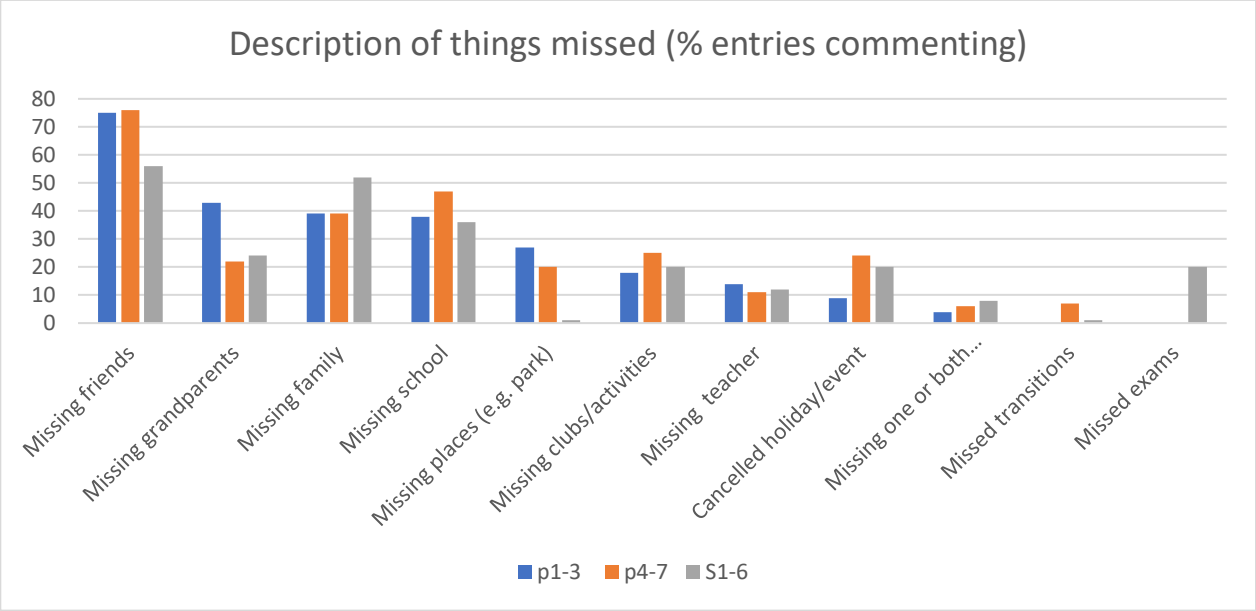
"Another change to my daily life is that I'm finding myself becoming more bored than normal. I'm trying to keep myself entertained by working out…Lockdown has given me time to do stuff that I would not normally do. For example I planted a tree in my garden and I cut a branch off a tree in my garden to make a seat there . It has been fun doing all of this in lockdown." Owen age 12

Art work by

Paula

Age 12

Description of things missed



Primary 1-3 children seemed to miss grandparents and visiting the park more than other age groups. Primary 4-7 were missing school and clubs more than other ages. Secondary young people were missing the wider distant family more than the other ages. Some had siblings in lockdown far from home. Missed exams was clearly a worry for those affected.

"I miss my family and friends lots and really really really want to go back to school but I don't want lots more people to die so I know we have to stay at home just now. I am not sure how many more golf ball hunts I can go on, last count… 248 golf balls all found during lockdown." Rona (p6)

"Many things had to be cancelled such as my sister….wedding which was really hard for her to find out she would have to wait for her special day. Loads of tv events and tv shows had to be postponed. My brother… was due to sit his higher exams but all exams were cancelled and all results will be based on all course work and prelim results." Sally age 12

"During this time I am really missing my grandparents, they do come up to the house and stand at the back door and speak to us for a bit but that's it because we aren't allowed anything more than that. Despite the circumstances I'm still managing to stay in touch with my friends over facetime and text messages. During this time social media is essential." Tilly age 11

Description of Positives of Lockdown

Drawing by Wendy age 5

Drawing by Violet age 5

Many children and young people described reflecting on reasons to be grateful. A large number had taken part in appreciating the NHS and key workers, clapping on Thursdays, drawing rainbows even a thank you to Postie.

"My new teacher is my mum. She is also the cook at my school and she cooks really good food. And everybody loves her food. I am really lucky to have her." Zara age 10

"I am very lucky because I have a big garden to play in with lots of things to do but not everyone has a garden. Some people live in flats and I feel sad for the people who don't have a phone or a games console to talk to their friends." Angus age 10

"I think our NHS are doing an extraordinary job and have been giving my support every Thursday at 8pm with my clap." Belinda age 13

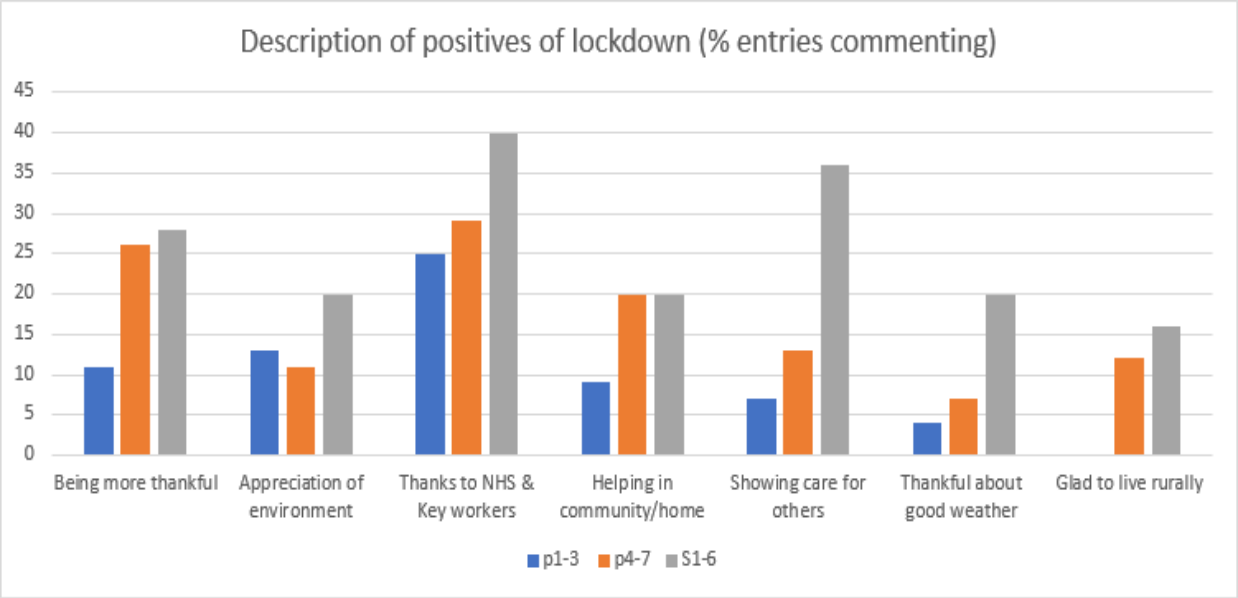
"…you must remember that there were and still are families out there suffering miserably and are missing their loved ones. Just remember to be thankful you have a life. Just remember to the thankful for what you have. Just remember there are people out there who aren't loved. So please just remember you are loved….Just remember." Carrie age 14

"After Lockdown I think people will be more careful so there won't be a next time. I want to forget about it and get back to normal." Donald age 8

"There will be some positives….. it brought communities closer together which is rather strange as they all had to stay two metres apart." Frank age 8

There were many comments about the environment, living rurally and being able to enjoy nature. Other comments were noting that the environment was benefiting from the lockdown and less human activity.

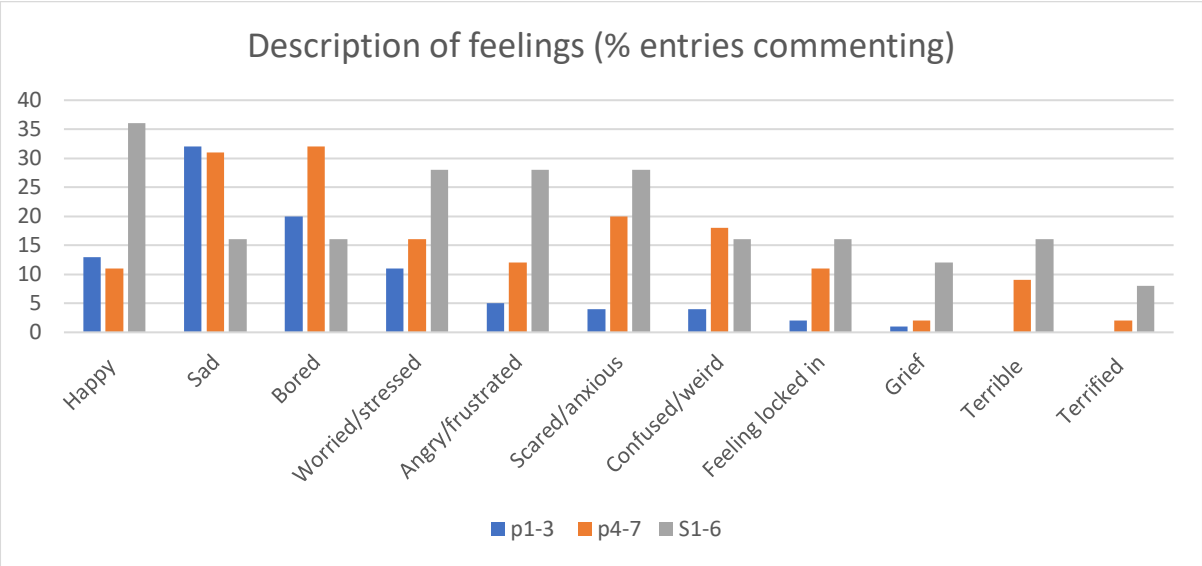
"I have actually relished the time spent with my mum and my brother, we've chatted more and worked together to get practical chores done around our house. I love to walk my pet dog each day through the forest and with so much less traffic noise, I am aware of the sounds of the wildlife all around me. I feel that this experience has made me more grateful for the small things in my life such as my garden and how lucky I am to have outdoor space to enjoy." Eva aged 16



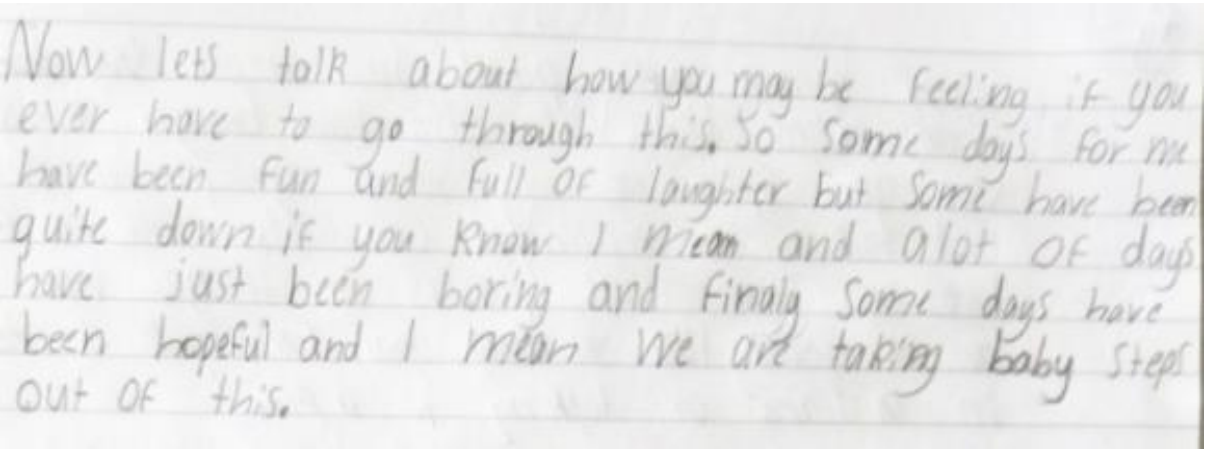
A number of children and young people had been helping in their community. They had been writing letters to people living on their own, raising money for the NHS, delivering shopping to people shielding. The secondary aged young people especially had taken on board the need to support or help others.

"We wanted to raise money for the NHS. Sir Tom Moore inspired us. We picked and tied daffodils to sell in the Egg Box Shop for a donation a bunch. We made over £20." Gina age 9

Description of Feelings



While some young people expressed happy feelings or said that they had some fun, many more comments were made about negative feelings. Some children or young people described only positive or only negative feelings, but 16% of primary 1-3 entries; 25% of p4-7 entries and 56% of secondary aged entries described both positive and negative feelings. The entries are likely to be from the children and young people who are better supported in lockdown. It is reasonable to think that those who do not have supportive family, garden space, access to online communication with others etc. will have more negative feelings.


Now lets talk about how you may be feeling if you ever have to go through this. So some days for me have been fun and full of laughter but some have been quite down if you know I mean and alot of days have just been boring and finaly some days have been hopeful and I mean we are taking baby steps out of this.

Quote by Holly age 11

Drawing by Izzy age 6

"Lockdown sometimes feels like it is the worst thing that has ever happened to me, like being chained to your home and no one can help but other times I love it as we get to spend time together as a family." Jenny age 12

"One thing I am finding quite hard is to try and forget about the virus every second of the day, but it's all over social media, the news and radio stations. Going into the shop feels like a crime, most people are wearing masks or putting scarves to their mouths. The streets are so derelict and you're lucky if you meet two people when going for a dog walk. I find that I have some good days where I am productive with schoolwork and get things done in the house but then other days I feel quite sluggish and find it hard to comprehend what's actually going on." Katie age 15

"My most memorable experience under lockdown was probably sadly when my Granda passed away (not due to Covid) and I didn't get to see him before he passed. And he had to have a very small funeral due to social distancing and it was only his close family and closest friends that could come to it." Lily age 12

"The government decided we were going to go into lockdown until it all passed over, the worse news ever to hear everything was ruined, all schools across the world exams got cancelled, holidays, concerts and all that got cancelled. Not only that but only one person out the house, one hour a day of exercise, and Mums and Dad started working from home as they were told to. Home schooling became a thing as schools were shut. It was honestly the worse ever, I personally felt I was in jail I couldn't do anything, can't see family members or my friends. It wasn't the same and I felt upset most days." Mary age 15

"I want to play out with my friends every day

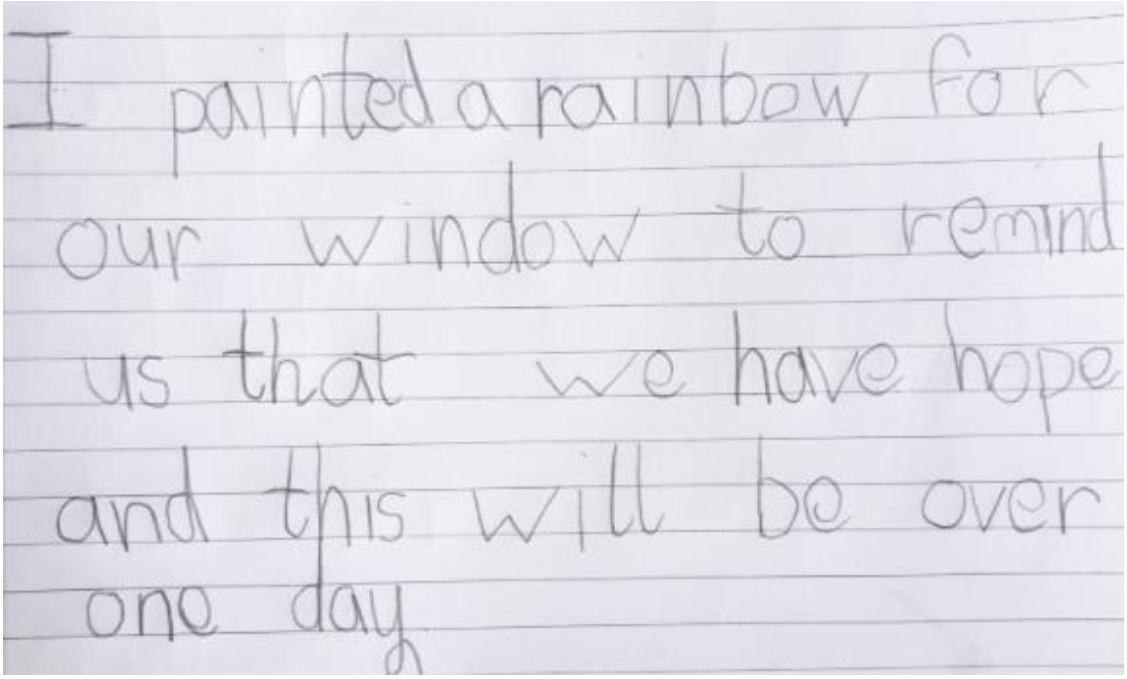
But cause of Coronavirus I must stay away

I can't visit family and that makes me sad

But I'm spending lots of time with my mum and dad,

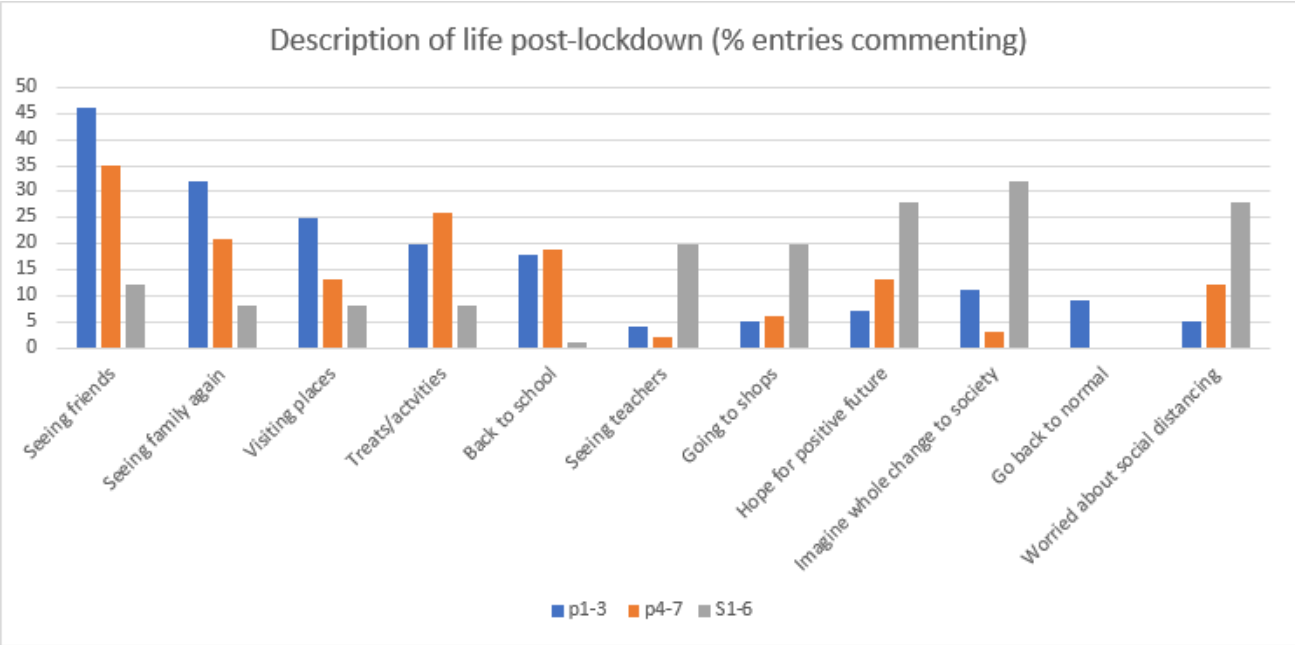
So lockdown sometimes *isn't* so bad." Niamh age 9

Description of Life Post-Lockdown


I painted a rainbow for our window to remind us that we have hope and this will be over one day

Quote by Olivia age 6

The children and young people spoke about the things they were looking forward to post-lockdown, but also of their concerns for what the world would be like.

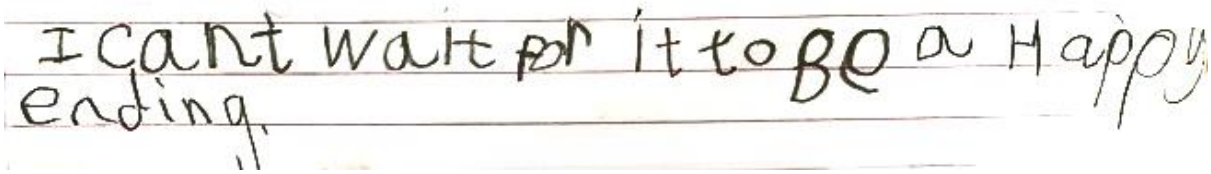


The primary 3-5s were most keen to see friends and family again. This might reflect the fact that they have less access to friends and family online. A number of the secondary age young people imagined that the world would not be the same again. Some of that was a hope that some of the positives in lockdown, appreciation of one another and of the environment, would continue. Some of it was concern about what a world with social distancing would look like. There were concerns that school in particular would not be as good if social distancing was still in place.

"Overall I'm feeling okay. The only thing I'm worried about is how long will it take to return to normal. How long will it take for the economy to sort itself out; how long until businesses recover from this brutal blow of not being able to make money. Then getting their customers back fully. Well i guess time will tell; i hope your living life to the fullest see you soon." Steven 15

"I'm looking forward to seeing my family and friends when lockdown is over. I know it will be awhile yet before I can dance again in class but I'm really looking forward to that. Going swimming and being able to go out and play in the park and meet my friends. Looking forward to when social distancing stops and you can stand close to someone." Tammy age 10

"After lockdown I'm not sure how life will be because I do not think it will go completely back to normal. We will probably have to social distance for a while and maybe in the hostel we might not be able to share a room with anyone. But after lockdown I'm looking forward to seeing my friends and family again and getting back into normal face to face dance classes and having a social life." Ruby age 14



Quote by Zeb age 6

Considerations

The letters provided by the young people are a wonderful legacy for future children. They describe well the circumstances of the lockdown, how it was carried out and what the experience of living in lockdown was like.

The number of children and young people who had experienced low mood or anxiety at some level was worryingly high, especially when it could reasonably be expected that there will be many children and young people who are worse off in terms of their experience.

However, there are also real signs of resilience and hope from these responses. Children and young people have grown in appreciation of the good things they have and also in their understanding of how much more difficult life has been for some people.

Young people had also shown a real interest in news: policy making; scientific development; economic impact; the environment and future planning. Many children and young people have learned new skills and sought to keep fit. Some had understood the importance of looking out for their own mental health and the mental health of their peers. These are real strengths from which resilience can be grown. Young people themselves do not want to lose these benefits, but rather build on them moving forward.

There will be other children and young people who will have had greater stress factors during this time and less opportunities to build resilience. It will be really important to seek opportunities to build resilience and wellbeing as well as closing the attainment gap, which will have grown due to the different access to education and support over the lockdown term.

The report from the Independent Impact Assessment from the Children and Young People's Commissioner considers the rights of children and young people under the UNCRC that are under threat because of the lockdown and other decisions taken, particularly the right to education, to play/leisure, and to having a say in matters that affect them. Children and young people should be actively involved in planning how best to "build back better". This is an opportunity to work with children and young people to recognise their priorities and involve them in decisions about how to build mental health & wellbeing and bridge the attainment gap. These are good citizens in the making, thrown into a new understanding of the needs of others.

This is a time to listen and involve children and young people to realise their rights and enable the growth or resilience in all our children.

Acknowledgements:

Highland Children and Young People's Forum would like to thank:

Each child and young person that took the time to enter their letter from lockdown.

Each parent who videoed, posted, emailed or uploaded an entry on behalf of their child.

Each teacher who sent Letters from Lockdown as an online learning exercise and those who emailed on the entries they received.

Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Children and Young People, for agreeing to be the judge.

Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland for writing the foreword.

Bill Alexander for reading the letters.

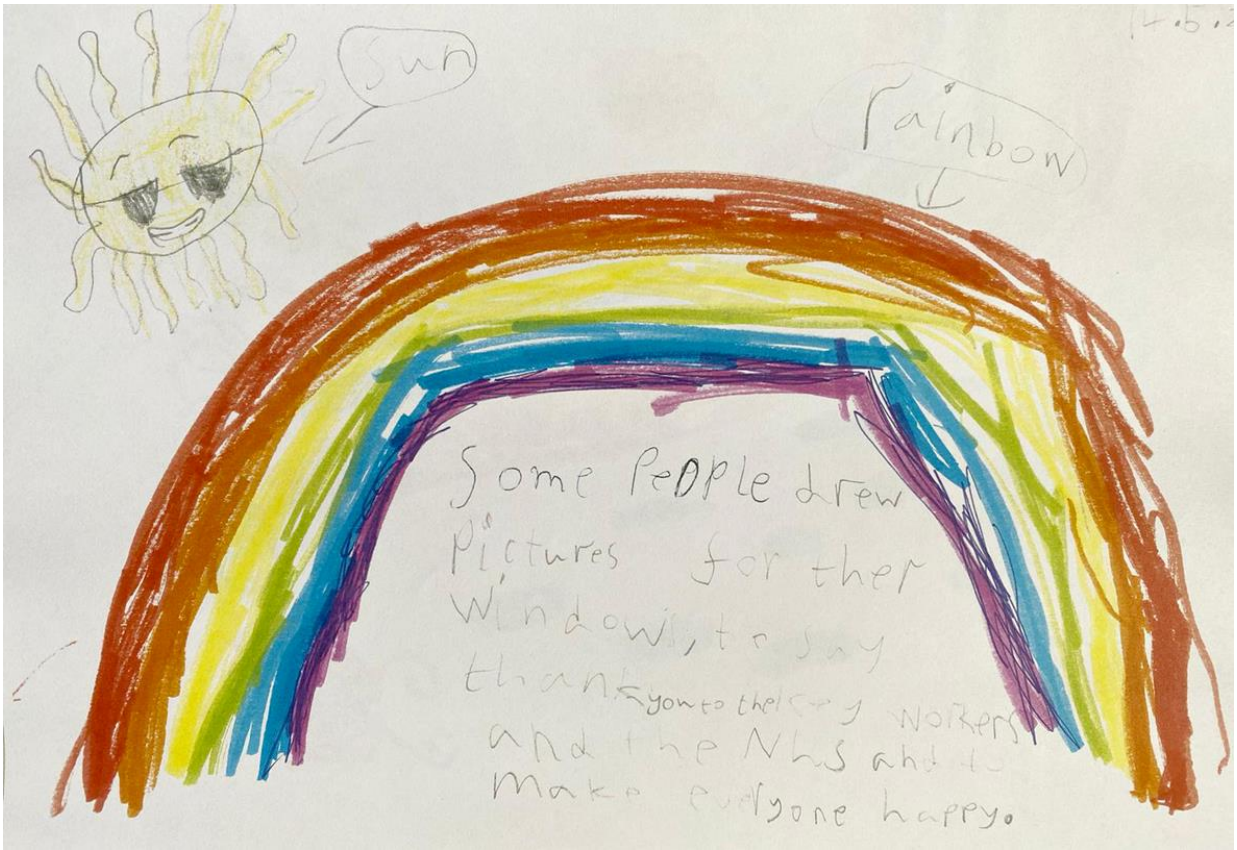
Lindsay Graham for her encouragement.

The Highland Council for funding the work of the Forum.

Family of Audrey Bowie.

Drawing by Catriona age 6

Drawing and quote by Una age 8



Drawing by Zoe (p5)