



**Covid 19 and its impact on the lives of those involved
with Le Chéile Mentoring**

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**An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Department of Justice**



Introduction

The purpose of this consultation was to capture the lived experiences of mentees and mentors during the Covid 19 pandemic crisis and how Covid restrictions impacted their experience of being a mentee or mentor with Le Chéile Mentoring. As we know, the past 18 months since March 2020 has presented many challenges and all organisations in the community and voluntary sector have had to adapt in order to respond to needs appropriately.

A study of youth engagement with services in Ireland published in September 2020 by the National Youth Council of Ireland showed that young people who were deemed the most 'at risk' and already marginalised became the most disconnected from supports as a result of Covid 19. Le Chéile recorded on their case management system (Salesforce) a 42% decrease in hours of engagement with youth and parent mentees in the 12 months of Covid restrictions from February 2020 to March 2021. This is compared to the previous 12-month period. However, the organisation also recorded a 31% increase in individual youth and parent mentoring sessions. This indicates that remote sessions were shorter but more frequent as 800 more mentoring sessions took place in the same period. The report 'A review of the youth work sector response to the Covid 19 pandemic' records a 70% drop in young people engaging with youth services. It is in this context that Le Chéile Mentoring worked to maintain engagement with those young people most marginalised in Irish society during this time.

Le Chéile commissioned an independent consultation to capture the voices of mentees and mentors involved in their mentoring service during the Covid 19 pandemic. The consultation took place from June to August 2021. This report is based on semi structured interviews and focus groups that took place with both mentees and mentors living in different locations across the country. It highlights the challenges but also how the organisation responded and what new learning was achieved. The consultation was designed with input from staff and management from Le Chéile itself. There was an open call to invite all mentors and mentees to participate in this consultation. Overall, 10 youth mentees, 9 parent mentees and 11 mentors engaged in the process. Consent was sought from each interviewee and appropriate supports were put in place by staff to support mentees and mentors as required after the interview or focus group.

As we emerge from Covid 19 and eighteen months of restrictions, it is an opportune time to reflect on how all levels of society have been impacted in ways which would have been unimaginable two years ago. This report aims to capture the lived experience of a portion of Irish society who for the most part is living with disadvantage and have been involved with the Youth Justice System. Their feedback provided valuable information for Le Cheile in reviewing the period March 2020 to August 2021, with the view of informing practise post Covid. The support of Le Chéile staff in encouraging the mentees and mentors to participate in the consultation and providing support afterwards was invaluable to this report.

Lynne O'Connor

Youth Mentees' experience of life during Covid

Daily Life

The ten youth mentees who took part in the interviews were aged 15 - 25, there were six males and four females. All made an effort to meet in person but for those who did not, or it was geographically too far, we spoke either on the phone or on zoom.

Most youth mentees spoke about not being able to meet up with friends and the challenges of trying to do school from home as the two key issues that mainly impacted their lives which would be expected from this age group. Adapting to new Covid preventative measures that were introduced, such as Covid tests, wearing masks and online learning were common themes. All mentees demonstrated their adaptability in the most challenging of circumstances created by Covid, including sticking to restrictions as best they could by not hanging around with their friends. This contradicts some of the negative coverage attributed to young people during the Covid crisis.

Two young men who I spoke to who were no longer in school also talked about being conscious that sitting in was not doing them any good. One young man aged 20 talked about a feeling of disappointment as he had a lot of plans which he could no longer do. He said he was usually quite active and that having to stay in during Lockdowns was not good as it led to over thinking and laziness. The other young man spoke about the first Lockdown being a '*shock to the system*' and finding it hard being told what to do by the Government. As somebody in recovery from substance abuse, he found that the activities he had in place, such as routine, boxing and meeting his Le Chéile mentor were taken away and he felt himself slowly deteriorating, resulting in a relapse after 6 months.

School

There was not one young person who said they liked home schooling. There was worry expressed by more than one youth mentee about exam results and predictive grades. Learning at home was challenging in some households where there was more than one child. This made it difficult to concentrate and to find a suitable quiet space for home schooling.

One young man aged 15, felt there was very little learning at home as he believed most young people turned off the cameras on zoom and went onto their phones. His analysis was that the Lockdowns made his age group lazy as with the lack of routine, more things started to feel like more of an effort. Even organising the laptop to log into school was more of an effort than actually going to school he felt. This possibly reflects the mental state for a lot of young people living in Lockdown and the lethargy that crept in as time went on.

Positives

There were some small unexpected positive outcomes for young people as a result of Covid and the restrictions. One young woman found employment with a local company who started making hand sanitiser and she feels she would not have had a job otherwise. Another young woman from a town in the west of Ireland found that having to stay at home due to restrictions was helpful. It meant for

her that she did not feel she had to go into town to the pub. The impact in her life was she felt there was a lot less trouble in the town in general. She hopes to have broken her former routine of going to the pub, which she attributes to Covid restrictions. This was echoed by a young man from Dublin who said the Covid restrictions were *'more of a plus'* as he found the streets more peaceful. The city being less packed resulted in him feeling more relaxed and he said he would *'do it all again if he could.'* Another girl, under the age of 18, said the restrictions were positive in some ways as there was not as much trouble and everywhere was quieter. This recurring theme highlights the need of young people for space and calm and how they have recognised the quieter times of Covid restrictions as a positive thing. This is the case for both male and female, under and over the age of 18 and in rural and urban settings across the country.

Three young people under 18 felt that the Covid restrictions did not have a huge impact on their lives as they could not go to pubs anyway. They still hung around with their friends and some said they became desensitised to the Covid 19 information that was constant on social media.

The impact of youth mentoring during Covid

Engagement and communication

All youth mentees except one were glad to have contact from their mentors or from Le Chéile staff when Covid restrictions meant it was impossible to meet face to face. The mentee who did not engage during Covid said he had a strong enough relationship with Le Chéile where he felt able to say he did not want to engage over the phone. He said that worked well for him as he did not feel any pressure from Le Chéile and he re-engaged when the restrictions had lifted. He identified that this was something that has made a positive difference to him as he felt it was his own choice to engage and he did not feel any pressure to do so.

During Covid, which forced all services to adapt and change how they engaged young people, mentors connected with mentees through a variety of media such as phone call, text, WhatsApp, Zoom. The most common was phone call or text and although mentees adapted to this as best they could, they all felt that they preferred face to face meetings. However, an interesting observation was made by a young woman aged 18, who said that some of her friends who also participate with Le Chéile Mentoring had only ever worked with their mentors by phone call. This was due to having commenced the process during Covid restrictions. She said that some of them were nervous about meeting face to face as phone call was what was their norm. She felt there should be an option of mentoring by phone or have a combination of phone and face to face meetings. This was also suggested by another female mentee who felt that phone calls were good and that *'kids who are with Le Chéile are more likely to have other appointments with other services'* and that sometimes phone calls work better as it can be hard trying to attend all appointments face to face. She also suggested a mix of face-to-face meetings once or twice a month with phone calls in between.

Challenges of remote mentoring

Despite youth mentees' ability and willingness to adapt, one young man aged 21 felt that after finishing on a phone or zoom call with a mentor, *'you don't walk away with the same feeling as when you meet face-to-face'*. The difference with meeting in person is that it is not just about face to face, it is about doing something together and he felt it *'takes space out of the day when you're not just thinking.'*

Mentoring by phone felt a little repetitive for some as being able to go out together with the mentor was not possible. Conversation flows more naturally for most mentees in a face-to-face meeting and inevitably made it easier. *'You can't explain a text or what expression you're using'* was how one girl aged 17 described the challenges of remote communication. This would demonstrate why the statistics reflect fewer mentoring hours during Covid as sessions were shorter in length due to the limitations of mentoring in this way.

Support

Youth mentees were supported and contacted by both their volunteer mentor and a local staff member during Covid. Mentees felt they did not see a difference and did not mind which it was. They felt supported by all and felt there was not much that could have been done differently. There was an overwhelming sense of appreciation that mentors and staff kept in touch during Covid and that they were aware there was somebody there to listen to them. This is also the case for one mentee who had disengaged during Covid, but he still felt that even though he did not participate, he knew that Le Chéile was there for him as the outreach was consistent.

Youth mentees received support through receipt of vouchers to enable them to stay connected and engaged during Covid restrictions. These were mainly phone credit or food vouchers, which were particularly helpful to those who were waiting to get paid.

One girl identified that young people often do not have hobbies as they do not know what there is or what the choices are. She felt it would be a good idea for mentors to make suggestions or introduce young people to new things.

One young man captured how he perceived the support from Le Chéile by describing it as something that you cannot buy. He felt a lot of young people think you are doing it for probation purposes but that it does not feel like that at all. *'You can't buy what they give, they talk to you like one of your own, talk at a deeper level 24/7'*. The sense of communicating on an equal and deeper level was different and critical to the process.

Parent Mentees' experience of life during Covid

I spoke with nine parent mentees who were all mothers . They voluntarily participated in the consultation. Those who are unable to physically meet spoke to me on the phone.

The first section of the interview focused on if and how Covid 19 and the subsequent restrictions and Lockdowns imposed by the Irish Government impacted on their daily lives. All responded that the restrictions did impact on their lives. There was a varying degree of impact and in some cases not always negative. However, three of the women became emotional when asked how the restrictions impacted their lives.

Feelings

The three core feelings identified were isolation, anxiety, and fear. Loss featured throughout for most women, whether it was loss of a loved one or lost opportunities. These were spoken about in depth by some women and there were some who experienced loss due to Covid itself. One parent said she felt '*terrified*' and that not only was she conscious that the behaviour of her son regressed, but she also felt her own mental health regressed. Fear of the news was mentioned several times with people saying that they tuned out of it as time went on, it was too difficult to listen to and it impacted their mental state.

Another mother felt the Covid restrictions made her a life '*an utter nightmare*' and in the context of her family situation, it was evident that it was an extremely challenging and isolating time for her. She identified her societal disadvantage as a factor, as she was confined to two rooms with her family of three generations. She acknowledged that having a lack of a nice home or garden to sit in compounded the existing challenges. She spoke about how she witnessed her mother die from Covid 19, and this was a particularly harrowing story. '*Covid is a memory that makes me angry*' is how she will remember it.

Living with Addiction

The impact of Covid restrictions on mentees and their family members with addiction was also evidently challenging with one mother unable to visit her son who was a resident in the Aislinn Adolescent Rehabilitation Centre and unable to attend a course for parents. Another parent was herself in recovery from addiction and found it very difficult to engage with her AA meetings. This was due to not understanding the technology and how to use zoom. She felt that any of the supports or tools that she had put in place before Covid fell away due to the restrictions, such as yoga and mindfulness classes. The difficulty of engaging with services over the phone was also spoken about as some parents felt it was difficult when you had not previously met the person face to face, such as for counselling sessions.

Positives

There was a silver lining for some parents despite the sense of fear and anxiety that was consistent across all interviews. Some spoke about Covid '*giving more time*' and for one young mother it was

time to think and to focus, time for prayer and to be able to access Mass on the television. One woman was able to describe having come from the UK, how she felt a lot more protected in Ireland due to the restrictions and reiterated that she felt that this alleviated some of her fear. She felt the restrictions were positive for her personally as she was grieving the loss of her daughter and did not want to be near people anyway.

An inspirational story came from a woman who experienced extreme anxiety and challenges with the behaviour of her son. She gained perspective from being isolated and took up sport as the restrictions lifted. She realised she was in a rut before the arrival of Covid and had felt hidden away for years. After a month of Covid restrictions she realised she had to change for her own survival and made the decision to take up team sports, which she feels she would not have done otherwise.

The impact of parent mentoring during Covid

Support

All parent mentees spoke about the support they received from Le Chéile Mentoring as being either critical or a hugely important support during the Covid crisis. *'A lifeline'* is how two parent mentees described the support they received and for some, contact from their Le Chéile mentor or staff support was the only contact they had from any service. It helped lessen the sense of loneliness and gave the feeling that there was somebody there who cared. The value of this cannot be underestimated particularly in the context of extreme isolation, fear, and chaotic home life. The phone call from their mentor or Le Chéile staff member gave parent mentees a sense of somebody not giving up on them and it was clear that for some, this was a critical part of their day or week. *'I would love to let people know what they [Le Chéile] did for me'.....'without that phonecall, I'm not sure if.....'*. Another woman agreed to be interviewed because she felt that the service was 'so good to her' during the pandemic and that she wanted to give back a little.

Another factor where support was very much felt was with the provision of care packages or vouchers from Le Chéile. Five out of the nine parents talked about how beneficial the receipt of vouchers for groceries was in particular, food parcels, phone credit which helped with isolation, craft packs for children, books, recipes. These were described as a big help and were done in such a way that it felt discreet and respectful.

Communication

All parent mentees preferred meeting mentors face to face but said they adapted to contact by phone call or zoom. A combination of methods was used by mentors to reach out to mentees and to communicate, such as phone call, text, messenger, zoom but each adapted individually to whatever worked best. Some felt it was easier that they knew the mentor before the Lockdowns happened. The approach of the volunteers and staff was acknowledged in that it is open and genuine. There is a sense of being able to talk freely, with no pressure to engage but Le Cheile had consistent presence which was supportive. There was no sense of fear that was experienced by some people that engaged with other services according to one mentee.

Mentors experience of life during Covid

Eleven mentors took part in the consultation, mainly from the southeast region with some joining on zoom from Limerick and Dublin.

Daily Life

The mentors experience of living through Covid 19 is reflective of the mentees and likely reflects the experience nationally. The picture painted is that of very mixed perspectives of life through Lockdown restrictions, with some finding it to be a very negative time in their lives and experiencing the 'fear factor'. It echoed what some of the parent mentees had said about wanting to see the news but at the same time it was very negative and not conducive to positive mental health. One man said that he felt a need to hear what Dr Tony Holohan had to say on a daily basis, even though it felt like there was no light at the end of the tunnel. Fear was also talked about by another mentor who works in the health sector with a huge sense of uncertainty and things changing on a daily basis.

Online and phone communication did not suit all but one mentor who described herself as 'a complete extrovert' admitted she had a love/hate relationship with technology. However, despite it not suiting, she did recognise that it served us well during the pandemic situation. Some mentors, notably the younger age profile talked about finding a lot of positives in the Lockdown restrictions. The theme was having '*more time*' to reflect and to spend with family. One young man said that as a college student, it was a very isolating time but that engaging with Le Chéile and taking part in the training online opened up a new world and meant he met a lot of new people and it kept him connected.

Mentoring through Covid

Connection

The importance of connection was a common factor to all mentors, both in their personal lives and also this followed through the connection with their mentees. All mentors used phone calls and text to try and keep the connection with their mentees, as the restrictions did not allow for face-to-face contact during this time. Although all adapted to this new way of engaging with mentees, it was acknowledged across the board that it was no replacement for face-to-face mentoring. As one woman put it '*there was no emotionality online, this way of communicating loses the nuances of communication*'. It was concurred by another group member who said that although they spoke to the mentee every week on the phone, it lacked the depth of sharing and connection that is possible with face-to-face meeting. There was a sense of frustration where Covid restrictions meant that face-to-face meetings with mentees could not take place and there was a sense that this limited support.

Although it was unanimously agreed that online supervision was not the same as face to face, all mentors still felt the positive impact of taking part. Some got a great comfort from it and benefited from hearing from others and being reminded of good practise. There was agreement that being part of the '*mentoring community*' provided a connection and relieved some of the isolation experienced

during Covid restrictions. Group supervision also gave a mood lift and an energy boost for some.

Support

Mentors spoke overwhelmingly about the support received from Le Chéile during Covid restrictions. There was agreement from all about the benefits of training and supervision received from Le Chéile. It was perceived as being meaningful and helpful and mentors feel a sense of being valued. However, there was agreement that online supervision, albeit sometimes more accessible, was not the same. The main impact being the relationships and energy created during face-to-face supervisions was missing.

Some mentors experienced very at-risk situations with their mentees during Covid restrictions, such as self-harm and suicide. They spoke about the support they received from Le Chéile staff and of not feeling alone on the journey with the mentee during such an isolating time. This made a critical difference to their experience of mentoring.

The tragic death of one young mentee during this time was acknowledged. The magnitude of the impact of this on the mentor and the staff of Le Chéile was recognised by all of the mentors who participated in the focus group.

Conclusion

The past 18 months show how the Le Cheile Mentoring organisation adapted to the best of its ability during this unprecedented time. *'It would have been easy for Le Chéile to have done a lot less, but they couldn't have done any more'* were the sentiments of one mentor when talking about his experience of mentoring through Covid.

From May 2021, Le Cheile's Activity Framework for Living with Covid 19 opened the doors for an increased level of face-to-face mentoring with those referred to the mentoring service, initially outdoors and later indoors. As part of this consultation mentees and mentors were asked if they could identify new ways of doing things that worked well during remote working. Their feedback forms the basis for the following conclusions. These conclusions affirm the successful practise of staff and mentors and highlight that it should continue. It is important to note that this is representative of a small percentage of the mentee/ mentor population and some of the views are from the minority.

1) Face to face mentoring

Overall face to face mentoring is the preferred way of doing mentoring for both mentees and mentors. Mentees and mentors highlighted having a better energy and leaving with a better feeling when mentoring face to face. It is clear that face to face mentoring should continue as the main support for the Le Chéile Mentoring service.

2) Blended Approach

- Parent mentees who took part in this consultation were happy with the remote support they received, both from mentors and staff of Le Chéile. The importance and value of phone calls was acknowledged and the practise of phone calls to mentees between face-to-face meetings should be continued. In some cases, more regular phone calls in between face-to-face meetings may be beneficial for a timelined period depending on need. For those with mental health or addiction issues, phone or zoom contact offers a degree of flexibility at a time when they may not have the capacity to have a meeting in person.
- For youth mentees, a blended approach with a mix of face-to-face meetings and phone calls might work well for some, but face to face contact to remain priority. For young people who have a number of appointments with different services, this blended approach could be more beneficial as it was identified as being easier to access in these circumstances.

3) Signposting

- Continued signposting of parent mentees to recreational activities and supports such as interest-based classes, yoga, mindfulness, this was identified as beneficial by some parents.
- Continued and increased signposting to interest-based clubs or youth services locally would be beneficial. The opportunity for youth mentees to try new interests or hobbies and to learn about what is available to them was identified as a recommendation by some young people.

4) Technology

- Continued use of technology for weekly updates and recording of expenses was a recommendation that came from mentors. For example, use of WhatsApp for this made it easier for mentors to follow session notes between contact with the mentee. It also lends itself to speedier administration in the reimbursement of expenses to mentors.
- Training that took place online was at times easier to access for mentors and although might not always achieve the same depth as training in person, it could be used for refresher training sessions where appropriate.
- A very small number of parent mentees mentioned experiencing difficulties with technology, most were able to use and access this. However, for those experiencing challenges, training on this could be explored.

5) Care Packs

- There was an overwhelming acknowledgment of the value of care packs and vouchers provided by staff and mentors to mentees. The emphasis was not in monetary terms primarily but in the sense of support felt. A recommendation from mentors was to be able to continue some provision of care packs as often it was a catalyst to improved engagement. The provision of phone credit was essential to those that needed it and mentors identified that this often-made mentees easier to reach

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that the support received by mentees and mentors from Le Chéile staff during the Covid 19 pandemic was exceptional. All mentees and mentors felt supported and acknowledged this, even those who chose not to engage fully. The service was working in the most challenging of circumstances with people who already had their own personal challenges. Appreciation was heartfelt for the thought that went into care packs and vouchers, this made a tremendous difference to some people's morale and mental wellbeing during this time.