

Board of Management

Date of Meeting	Wednesday 16 December 2020
Paper No.	BoM3-F
Agenda Item	5.5
Subject of Paper	College Response to the Commissioner for Fair Access
FOISA Status	Disclosable
Primary Contact	Principal
Date of production	15 December 2020
Action	For Noting

1. Recommendations

To note the report.

2. Purpose of Paper

2.1 The paper is a response to an invitation from Sir Peter Scott (the Scottish Government's 'Commissioner for Fair Access') to comment on the latest progress in delivering the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access - and the First Minister's associated commitment that, by 2030, students from the most deprived 20% of backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to university. Colleges play a crucial part in creating pathways to university, and this year, Sir Peter has specifically sought views on the impact of COVID-19 on widening access.

PGKL/MC/CG/007

27 November 2020

Sir Peter Scott

Dear Sir Peter

Thank you for your recent correspondence inviting me to contribute to the development of your latest Annual Report.

Let me begin with the issues you identify in your first letter. In my judgement, the access agenda is not one where there is a lack of policy proposal or intent. The issue is how and when we set in train the type of systemic reform that is needed both to achieve progress, and in reinforcing the need for a holistic approach to the transition from school to post-school learning, and the reform of Scotland's post-16 tertiary system.

As you will recall, this ambition for an agile, collaborative and inclusive approach is at the heart of the Cumberford-Little report that Audrey and I published in February this year, and which is now amplified by the recent report from the Independent Commission on the College of the Future. The SFC's recent Phase 1 report of its review of coherence and sustainability further argues the case for change, which, to my mind lies in effective implementation Cumberford-Little. If the Government were to set that in train it would, in turn, breathe new life into its apparently dormant plans for tackling and improving the 'learner journey', which, along with C-L, has not been pursued, as minds focus on COVID. Our C-L report also addressed colleges' role in supporting those at risk of exclusion, who already suffer disadvantage, have fewer choices and fewer chances in their learner journey, and bear the additional burden of 'clunky' transitions – from primary to secondary, and from school to post-school.

By way of specificity our recommendations address all part of our skills system. We call for:

- Ministers across Government to endorse and promote a narrative defining the purpose of a 21st college, with priorities of lifetime learning and business engagement;
- a new performance regime for colleges, supporting the refreshed purpose, and focused on outcomes and impact;
- a coherent, flexible, efficient tertiary system, re-visiting the current imbalance between college and university funding;
- SQA to review its post-16 portfolio against the new college purpose, focus on employers' needs, and especially short, focused or bite-sized learning interventions; and to help colleges design and develop their own qualifications;
- a two-year college degree, based on the Higher National Diploma, with additional work- placement content.

Having set out the strategic position, let me now address the specific areas focused on the impact of COVID-19 that you addressed in your most recent correspondence.

The digital challenge

While bringing an additional urgency to delivering many of my College's digital ambitions, COVID-19 has also exacerbated the related challenges and introduced significant new ones. Some of these, set out below, are again system-wide issues and their resolution will require cross-sector working and leadership from the Scottish Government. Access to equipment and connectivity remain a priority; but the sheer pace of change has brought to the fore the issues of digital literacy and digital competencies. For example, we know that our ESOL learners and adult returners are facing additional challenges in participating in online learning.

At the same time, there are challenges for school leavers, especially in terms of their preparedness for college online learning environments, which can differ markedly from a school iPad experience.

The stability of the home environment for those most disadvantaged is also a worry. The number of care experienced learners successfully completing their course fell last year, and in part, this seems to mirror the move online - which took place toward the end of the final study block.

Reflecting more broadly on our COVID response, City has made significant progress with connectivity and the provision of emergency learning. Achieving our own expectations for a coherent and high quality blended learning experience is, however, more challenging. At the heart of this is delivering a safe environment whilst ensuring learners continue to build underpinning subject knowledge. In response, faculties are piloting different approaches. The faculty of Nautical Studies and STEM, for example, has established a new learning enrichment zone. Adhering to necessary health and safety protocols, this provides a safe space for peer-to-peer learning support, and learning and teaching engagement. The ambition is to tackle isolation and build resilient learning communities, in turn an important step forward in managing the risk of learner retention.

Taken together, we can summarise the digital challenges as:

- digital inclusion - access to equipment, services and support. We introduced an innovative laptop loan scheme for those students without the resource to acquire the necessary equipment. But this comes as an additional cost - in our case of some £1.6m;
- indeed, the sustainability of digital provision may require a new public private partnership to manage the user costs of participation through zero rated provision and data commitments from telecom providers. This highlights the role of JISC, and asks new questions of its position as the UK's digital support network for colleges and universities;
- digital literacy, and the ability for those most disadvantaged to be able to participate in public life;

- digital skills - developing the capacity of the sector to meet current and future employer demand, including from overseas companies;
- Digital well-being and the oversight of safe and supportive educational experiences;
- Digital capacity and capability and investment in people;
- Digital infrastructure;
- Licensing

There is also a set of digital challenges that apply to our ESOL community. I have attached, as an annex to this letter, a note from our ESOL team, that sets out the difficulties, but which also identifies an innovative digital solution they have pursued.

Student experience

There are also detrimental impacts that arise from the absence of the wider student community and the support and benefits that come with that. As I say, our faculties are testing new approaches to try to bolster learner and tutor engagement and maximize peer support. We are especially mindful that simply more online guidance and engagement is not a solution in of itself.

We plan to coalesce the experience and practice from across the College and use this a focus for our Learning & Teaching Academy, an academic staff development service that supports and enables the enhancement of learning and teaching through the use of innovative pedagogy, appropriate technology, and use of learning spaces. Digital is its top priority, especially delivering digital transformation in learning and teaching while providing digital resources and networking opportunities to engage academic staff and improve online delivery.

Staying in touch with learners is also a priority. We are about to conclude our annual early engagement survey. Whilst the current response rate of 55% is slightly below last year, we are pleased that a large proportion of the student body has responded, especially given the absence of the usual cross-College support and engagement with staff and the student body. We will be looking at the results over the coming weeks and discussing this with Faculty teams as part of the continuous effort to support student experience and targeting learner support.

Targets and impact

As we continue to invest in people, equipment and learner engagement, we see positive trends in recruitment and participation in learning. For example:

- enrolments have been sustained, early withdrawals are reduced for both full-time FE and HE and we see higher rates of attendance.
- Full-time FT attendance is currently up 6 percentage points on the same point last year – at 85% for FE and almost 90% for HE at the end of November.
- early withdrawal is down in all categories of full-time provision, in both FE and HE – at 2% and 1% of all enrolments respectively, representing an improvement of 4pp and 2pp respectively on this time last year.

- A total of 160 learners are currently recorded as early withdrawals. The highest withdrawal rates, across both forms of study, are in the faculty of Hospitality and Leisure which typically has the highest SIMD cohort and the majority of hardship bursary support.
- most significantly, we currently see no disproportionate impact on different cohorts of learners. We are mindful that numbers will fluctuate, but the majority of protected characteristic groups have seen increased rates of enrolment. The exception is learners with a disability, where enrolments are down by around 100, year-on-year. In contrast, recruitment from the 20% most deprived postcodes is up by over 650 learners.
- Looking at the end of last session and the outcomes of all learners in their final year of study, we see no major disruption to successful completion rates. The exception was (as I noted earlier) an 8pp drop for our care experienced learners, although this figure does fluctuate year on year. In contrast, successful completion rates for learners with a disability were up by 2pp at 74%. And those with caring responsibilities also saw an increase in successful completion rates, up by 3pp to 79%.
- While we continue to monitor all outcomes, we expect an impact on the college senior phase cohort where enrolments are likely to fall markedly because of the impact of social distancing and the re-prioritisation of school timetables. For those joining new programmes, we also expect challenges with continued retention and completion, especially given the current difficulty in securing meaningful employer engagement.
- We are currently unable to provide additional information on learners previously in receipt of free school meals, though, given the multiple indicators of deprivation, it is perhaps unnecessary to seek further measures. It is clear from the range of available data, for example, that increasing numbers of learners are presenting with more interrelated support needs. Responding to these at scale remains a challenge for all colleges. It is also a matter that needs to be better understood and represented as part how we contextualise success in further education.
- In all of this, one of the challenges emerging from COVID-19 is interpreting the current high levels of learner participation. For example, we are mindful of the transparency of online delivery and how it can mask both levels of learner participation and the extent to which learners are developing subject knowledge. It will therefore be important that all colleges target effective learner and academic support during the first assessment cycle. Given the improvements in successful completions across the sector - and here in City - we need to ensure the move on-line does not result in a future 'pile up' of incomplete assessments and increase in partial completions. Specific interventions will be needed to support our most at risk learners.

Taking all this into account, and the new challenges ahead, our conclusion is that, overall, we expect continued positive progress in City's contribution to Scotland's widening access ambitions.

National and Highers and vocational examinations:

The cancellation and disruption to exams has affected cohorts differently. Those for Nat 5 and Higher provision, for example, are normally part-time and so had less opportunity to generate evidence for assessment in comparison with full-time students in schools. Additionally, we had no prelim evidence for exam-only learners (this was scheduled for the week in which the UK first entered lockdown in late-March). While SQA guidance clarifying prelims did not need to take place, was helpful, we still had to run prelims after the College's closure since it had no other basis for assessment. The confusion this created among different groups of learners ultimately resulted in an increase in learner complaints about disparity and unfairness.

There were also practical challenges: in many incidences, coursework evidence, to be used as part of assessments, was unavailable as it was locked in College, meaning lecturers had no access to marks and grading information. The College also teaches learners registered at other centres, who sit the exam in college but, for example, are presented by schools. The disruption to timetables in one part of the system therefore affected these learners, whose assessment took place in another.

We are working through these difficulties with SQA, but problems remain. Currently, we still await guidance on the approach to the inclusion of the graded unit within certain vocational qualifications. How this is interpreted across different subjects and faculties, whilst ensuring parity for learners, remains a challenge. Earlier resolution by SQA and the sector would have been helpful, especially as we now approach the first cycle of assessments with both course lecturers and learners still unsure of the agreed approach.

Articulation

We still await SFC data, so cannot yet comment on the numbers successfully articulating at the end of the last session. HN recruitment this year, though, has largely been unaffected, with recruitment levels sustained at over 7,000 learners. We are unaware of any changes to existing institutional commitments and existing partnerships are continuing. However, as noted above, there will be work needed in both sectors to ensure those learners articulating at the end of the last session are known, monitored and supported.

Public health measures

As of 23 November, we have 29 students diagnosed with Covid and 9 cases among staff. We are pleased that the numbers overall are so low and attribute that to the speed at which we took measures to mitigate risks. At the outset, we were the first college to close, (we closed our two campuses overnight), and physically re-opened as soon as possible to ensure continuity of learning for those courses where practical assessment is essential.

Throughout, our commitment to protecting the safety of our learners and staff has been my top priority. That commitment is visible in the physical environment and in the on-campus experience – from the signage, the state-of-the-art thermometers installed on entrance, and the increased presence of facilities staff. The associated costs borne by the College, run to some £350,000, and climbing.

I was delighted that the measures we took were validated in a recent impromptu health and safety audit of our hair and beauty programmes undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive and Environmental Health Officers who together concluded it was the best practice they had seen, and suggested using the College as a benchmark. A further endorsement is the fact that, compared to this time last year attendance is up by 5pp at 87% - building on the positive end of year course completion rates for both FE and HE – the latter an all-time high for the college at nearly 77%.

Finally, I attach two short supplementary papers on ESOL students, and the wider matter of student mental health, prepared by Dean of Education and Humanities, and my Director – Student Experience. Respectively. Like me, I'm sure you'll find them illuminating.

I am very conscious there is a wealth of detail in this letter, so should be more than happy to discuss any of the content. I do hope you find it helpful in informing your forthcoming report.

Yours sincerely

Paul G. K. Little

Paul GK Little FRSE
Principal & Chief Executive Officer

ANNEX

COVID-19: ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHERS LANGUAGES

COVID-19 and its associated remote working has amplified the difficulties in working with ESOL applicants and students. Application, enrolment, fee-waiver, induction, teaching and learning are proving very challenging - and, to a degree, insecure - because of diversity of need, of digital capacity and of digital skills. ESOL learners at City of Glasgow College include speakers of over 60 different languages. Their familiarity and proficiency in English varies hugely, ranging from literacy learners who have had little or no formal schooling to university graduates aiming to re-join their professions.

Immigration Status also plays a significant part. ESOL students are settling in the UK for a number of different reasons: to claim asylum; seek humanitarian protection, or in the case of refugees, Leave to Remain; for reunion with family; and for work visas as a dependent of UK and EU/EEA Citizens. Many of these criteria correlate to markers of deprivation and exclusion, and large numbers of our learners are service users of charities such as British Red Cross, Scottish Refugee Council and Positive Action in Housing.

There are additional challenges faced by this student group, beyond those identified above. ESOL students are very often motivated or forced to leave their homeland at some point and under a wide variety of circumstances. That kind of move in any form is itself an upheaval, proving stressful and exhausting. In addition, many students suffered oppression, victimisation, torture, and physical and sexual abuse in their home countries. They very often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress, and their ability to function on an everyday level, let alone learn, memorise and study, is impaired.

Case Study

We explored connectivity and access to a digital resource for ESOL students and noted that some students relying on a smart phone access to their course; the sharing of family devices and data was commonplace; students use libraries and local community hubs for internet access, or access to a digital resource; and some were walking the streets or sitting outside cafes/bars where internet access was free and available.

To date we have 1,813 live ESOL enrolments this session, of which 469 are Asylum Seeker or Humanitarian Protection status, who are, by definition "destitute". Asylum Seekers or Humanitarian Protection status students are the most deprived group within the ESOL community, and unlikely to have access to a digital resource or internet connectivity. City of Glasgow College invested some £300,000 to provide Chromebooks with an internet device and one years' worth of unlimited data to these students. The curriculum team, in discussion with our Learning and Teaching Academy, are currently creating 'How to' videos along with paper based guides etc. to support the skills deficit in using these new digital resources.

It is essential we overcome these challenges, since we will otherwise see higher withdrawal rates in people for whom college is a lifeline to their well-being and in integrating to Scottish society.

Citizen Literacy app

Citizen Literacy (<https://citizenliteracy.com/>) is an adult literacy education programme being developed by a number of partners led by City of Glasgow College. Our work is supported by the Ufi VocTech Trust, Nesta, The Innovation Foundation, and the Department for Education. We develop resources and services to support teachers help adults improve their reading and writing skills. We created our programme for Adult Literacy and ESOL Literacy students within college- and

community- based settings and we have been delighted by the take-up from our ESOL colleagues keen to use our resources with their ESOL Literacy students who can speak English but who need to develop their reading and writing.

The Citizen Literacy app is free (with no adverts) and offers a phonics-based approach to reading and writing. It is supported by classroom activities included in a Student Workbook and a Teacher Handbook. Our prototype was launched last month (<https://citizenliteracy.com/testing-feedback/>) and offers tutors and students the opportunity to trial Lesson 1 and feedback on it so that we can create products that suit as many students and educational establishments as possible. The prototype leads to the first five lessons which will be freely available in the App Store early 2021.

City of Glasgow College

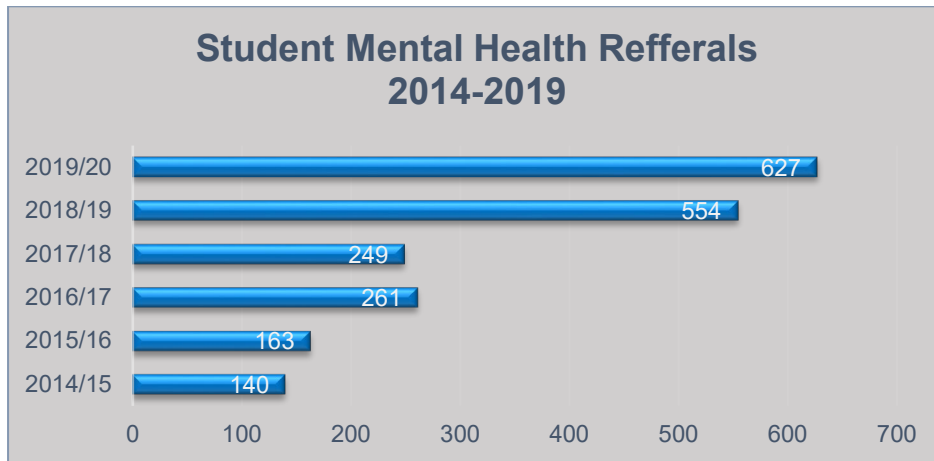
Faculty of Education & Humanities

November 2020

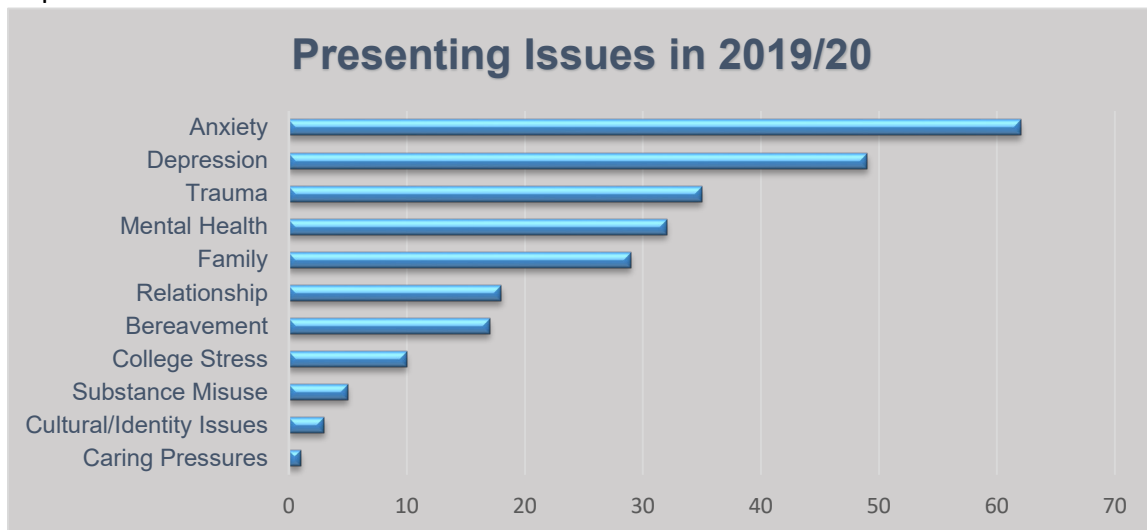
City of Glasgow College: Student Mental Health Update (Nov 2020)

Background

Referrals for mental health support have increased by 350% since 2014/15 (6 year period).



Presenting issues have remained consistent in the main but in 2019/20 anxiety overtook depression as the most common issue.



Protected Characteristics 2019/20:

- Students accessing support are predominantly female, aged 16 – 24.
- There is a high representation of care experienced students, LGBTQ and BME.

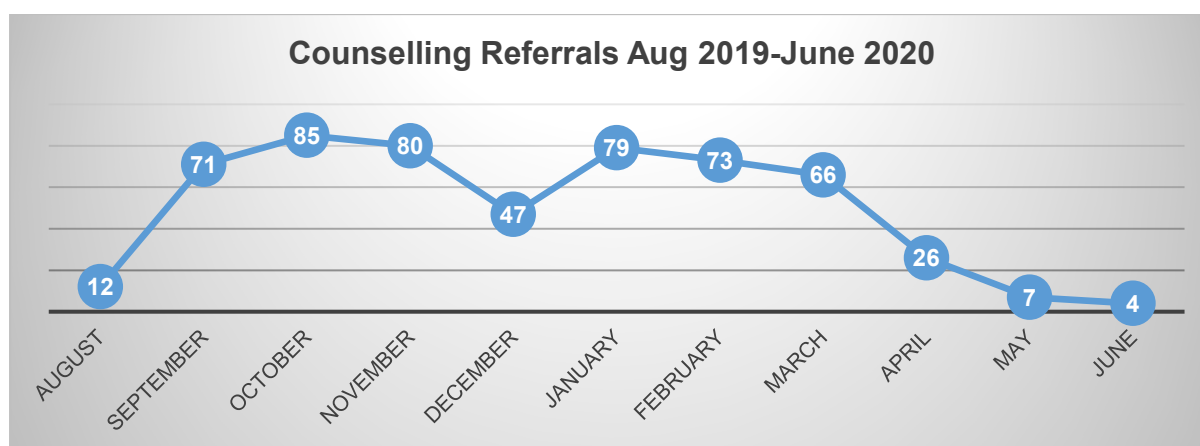
(We work with Brothers in Arms and the Sailor's society to support interaction with male students; and with Who Care Scotland/Action for Children for those with care experience. City Students Association has an LGBTQ Society).

City of Glasgow College: Student Mental Health Update (Nov 2020)

March 2020 – First Lockdown

From lockdown in March, on-campus counselling services transitioned to telephone counselling. We were fortunate that our Counsellors were trained in telephone counselling, making the transition fairly seamless. The experience highlighted the importance of having Counsellors trained in a range of counselling delivery methods and models – on which we have now built to include video and workshop delivery.

During lockdown the number of referrals for counselling dropped, together with engagement. Some students reported that telephone counselling was not for them, others said they no longer required the service. There was a feeling among staff that the main issues impacting on students while on campus (i.e., relationships with other students, social anxiety, exam and assessment stress) had been supplanted by concerns about Covid-19.



During this period City procured (the then) Big White Wall - now Togetherall - to offer students (and staff) a safe community to support mental health 24/7. The number of logins immediately after lockdown was over 1,000 but have since tailed off.

Other services we offered during lockdown included:

- weekly welfare checks undertaken with most vulnerable students – mental health/care experienced;
- specific support and welfare checks for students in City Halls of Residence;
- a series of short 'well-being' videos for social media including on social isolation/loneliness, and Let's Talk;
- updated website and social media channels with relevant mental health and well-being information, videos, crisis contact numbers etc.;
- promotion on social media of information on gender based violence;
- networking meetings with other colleges and universities, and student accommodation providers to share practice and development ideas;
- live online Yoga and Mindfulness sessions and

City of Glasgow College: Student Mental Health Update (Nov 2020)

- through City S, a range of other physical and entertaining activities: Virtual 5k, Step Count Challenge, Staff Awards Ceremony, Pet Competition.

It is important to stress that we used a holistic approach to support students - the entire Student Experience Team/CitySA resources worked in unison throughout lockdown to support students. Mental Health issues and personal crisis can often be alleviated with practical support such as finance, accommodation, learning support and equipment. This helps students feel that something is being done and gives them back a sense of control.

Our Students Association is a great catalyst for engaging getting students.

September 2020

Referrals for counselling at the start of the term were slower than usual, but are now increasing rapidly. As yet we have no waiting list.

New developments this academic year include:

- all Counsellors trained in video counselling, in addition to telephone counselling. Students are responding well to this.
- Mental Health and Well Being is included in all induction materials.
- In December, we will launch a Series of '*Coping with COVID*' psycho-education videos to complement first series of 'Let's Talk' videos.
- Our first student Stress Management Workshops being developed and delivered in guidance slots. These have been very well received by students and staff, the latter rating them 'excellent'.
- a pilot of a four-week anxiety therapeutic group has just ended. Small numbers, but well received.
- Student Counsellors and Student Advisors are undertaking well-being telephone check-ins for those students isolating.
- We are drafting a wellbeing survey for our January intake.
- Mindfulness Living Based Course for students - completed on mid-November

Current Concerns of Students

Our Counsellors report that:

- many students are experiencing COVID compounding their concerns; for example, increased isolation, barriers to accessing social support and normal coping mechanisms;
- recently, more students appear to be recognising COVID impacts as a more significant factor in their seeking support.
- many students report that their College work is more challenging under Covid restrictions and remote learning.

City of Glasgow College: Student Mental Health Update (Nov 2020)

In a survey of 50 class reps:

88% say Covid has had a medium to high impact on their mental health and well-being as a student. Common comments include:-

- “*Loss of focus*”. Students have lost their routine affecting their mental health, and inducing a sense of loss of control and ‘drift’.
- “*Miss the social aspects of class*”. No perspective. Lack of peer support. Isolation.
- “*Zoom is mentally draining*”. Finding new ways of working without support is challenging, and lack of social cues - such as body language – is difficult.

However, some class reps reported feeling less stressed and pressured by not being on campus and enjoying the flexibility of a blended approach.

To counter some of the difficulties, teaching staff have:-

- offered guidance on remote and online learning.
- ensured teaching includes peer support and open chat rooms.
- limited zoom meetings to 60 minutes.

(City of Glasgow College Class Rep Poll, November 2020)

Urban vs Rural

The risk of developing mental health issues is higher for Urban dwellers:-

- depression is 20% higher in urban dwellers.
- psychosis 77% higher in urban than rural dwellers.
- generalised anxiety disorder 21% higher in urban than rural dwellers.

However, urban areas also bring benefits with access to education, employment and socialisation.

(Andrea Mechelli, Kings College London, 2019, [Cities and Mental Health](#))

SIMD10/20 areas have higher rates of mental ill health. These areas are defined by seven criteria related to health and income. Physical and mental health are clearly impacted by poverty. There is over 2.5 times the burden of health needs in the most deprived 10% in Scotland compared with the most affluent 10%. Research shows that GP consultations in very deprived areas are characterised by multiple health and social problems, reduced expectations, lower health literacy, and practitioner stress. Suicide rates in Scotland generally increase with increasing deprivation, with rates in the most deprived areas double that of the Scottish average.

(Mental Health: Deprivation, Scottish Public Health Information, November 2019)