

Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

Commons Education Select Committee: The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services

May 2020

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We are happy to provide oral evidence if required. Please contact Professor Carrie Paechter on carrie.paechter@ntu.ac.uk for further information.

1. Executive Summary

This submission is based on a combination of academic expertise and research in the field of education, children and young people, and the experiences of NCCYPF's key local partners during the COVID-19 pandemic to date.

- There was a lack of clarity about the policy which has led to inconsistency of implementation by schools.
- Schools have found it hard to respond immediately to national government announcements, which are not always easily operationalised at local level.
- In practice, few critical workers have sent their children to school, due to fear of infection. Schools have not always known from one day to the next which children would attend, which has made it difficult to plan staff resource and on-site provision.
- Partly as a result of previous budget cuts, children's services have been extremely stretched during the pandemic. Children who were already vulnerable have become more vulnerable during the lockdown period, and additional children have become vulnerable.
- There is concern that, once schools return, there will be an increase in referrals to Social Services as children disclose abuse that has taken place during the lockdown.
- Early years providers are concerned about the identification of vulnerable babies and young children, given the closure of child health clinics and reduction in health visitor services. Young children's social and emotional problems are also not being identified, and consequently children are not benefitting from early intervention.
- Parental mental health is an increasing concern for schools and early years providers.
- The closure of early years providers will have had unavoidable consequences for children's social skills.

- Closure of early years provision is likely to exacerbate income related child development gaps, which are already significant.
- Although some provision (including some family support) has successfully moved online, this is not accessible to all families who need it.
- Although we support the decision to cancel formal exams, the effects of this on the young people due to sit them are significant. We have concerns about the fairness of the qualifications awarded, due to known inaccuracies in teacher assessments and scope for schools to 'game' individual grades to benefit their data outcomes. Factoring in prior school attainment may mean that hard-working and talented students in underachieving schools do not get the grades they deserve.
- There are particular concerns for young people who do not attain Grade 4 in English and Maths GCSE this summer, as it is unclear how they will access courses or resit opportunities.
- Schools have been working hard to support children and young people and to provide consistent messages about remote learning. However the messages given out need to be flexible enough to adapt to different conditions.
- The change to statutory provision for children with EHCPs so that there only have to be 'reasonable endeavours' to provide what is needed has led some children to be removed permanently from therapists' caseloads.
- We are concerned that the move to telephone and online provision for mental health services may not be as effective as face to face contact and has made it harder for child and adolescent mental health services to support their clients. We are also concerned that some young people may be 'suffering in silence' and not telling adults about the deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing.
- We are concerned that, with the move to online learning, the expressive curriculum has been squeezed out of children and young people's experience. In the current context this is

particularly important as it helps them to talk about feelings such as fear, anxiety, loneliness and grief.

- There is a huge drop in the number of apprenticeships available. The effect of this on young people hoping to move onto apprenticeship will be devastating, and some will be left with no future plans.
- Although private nurseries have been supported to date by being able to furlough staff, we expect that some will fail because parents are fearful about sending their children back into group settings. If such settings close there will also be a shortage of childcare provision, which will impede economic recovery.
- There will be huge long-term impact on disadvantaged groups, including those with special educational needs, lack of parental support, and financial disadvantage, due to widening attainment gaps as a result of the lockdown.
- Families claiming free school meals were not always able to access the funding. At least one Nottinghamshire secondary school purchased vouchers for families using school funds. Some schools have allocated funds to providers supporting children in acute need but this is not sustainable in the longer term with current budgets.

Recommendations for contingency planning for future emergencies:

- We need to learn from the successes seen from a wide variety of providers.
- Schools and children's social care providers should be trusted to provide what is necessary on the ground, within wider parameters set by Government. Local Authorities have an important role to play in this.
- It should be recognised that being eligible for free school meals is not the only indicator of need. We need to plan for increased vulnerability, and more children becoming vulnerable, in emergency situations and after them.
- We need to develop more robust ways of working remotely with vulnerable children, young people, and families.

- Contingency plans should be put in place to ensure that all children and young people are able to access online learning in any similar future situation.
- Teachers should be better trained in the provision of online content and delivery, and how to tailor it for their specific students.
- There should be a national approach to planning for provision of online learning and development in an emergency situation. This might include: a bank of resources could be adapted; online careers advice and guidance; virtual platforms across all skills sectors for virtual work experience.
- There needs to be some slack in the system to allow for future emergencies without completely exhausting staff. We are concerned that staff who have stepped up now will be burnt out in September and that there will be considerable staff sickness when schools return full time.

2. Submission

This submission is based on a combination of academic expertise and research in the field of education, children and young people, and the experiences of NCCYPF's key local partners during the COVID-19 pandemic to date.

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers:

There was a lack of clarity about the policy which has led to inconsistency of implementation by schools. Given the long list of 'critical workers', schools had to interpret the guidelines in the light of their own staffing levels and capacity. This meant, among other things, that special schools were not always able to continue providing full-time, on-site education for all children with an EHCP, and some closed their doors completely. In Nottinghamshire, special schools are working together to remain open. However, only about 75 out of 1050 children are attending regularly. This is largely due to parental concerns about the safety of group settings, especially if their children find it difficult to social distance (either because they are dependent on physical care or do not understand the concept) or have life-limiting conditions. Nevertheless, there are also children with EHCPs whose parents desperately wanted a school place but did not get one, or were only offered a place part-time. This was especially the case for physically robust children with profiles involving learning disabilities, autism, and/or challenging behaviour.

Schools have found it hard to respond immediately to national government announcements, which are not always easily operationalised at local level.

In practice, few critical workers have sent their children to school, due to fear of infection. Schools have not always known from one day to the next which children would attend, which has made it difficult to plan staff resource and on-site provision. Schools also encountered problems in relation to families where both parents are critical workers but were both working full time at home: they were told not to accept children from these families.

There have been particular problems for schools which are between headteacher appointments or which have gaps in their leadership teams. These make planning more difficult.

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people:

Partly as a result of previous budget cuts, children's services have been extremely stretched during the pandemic, and this is expected to continue post-lockdown. Children who were already vulnerable have become more vulnerable during the lockdown period, and additional children have become vulnerable. Schools are particularly concerned about children and young people who are vulnerable but who do not have social workers. The expectation is that schools will provide care and support for these children and young people, but some of them are not attending school. This has brought additional leadership and resource demands for schools, for example in relation to maintaining contact with these children and families at home. There is anecdotal evidence that there has been an increase in Social Services referrals due to domestic violence. There is concern that, once schools return, there will be an increase in referrals to Social Services as children disclose abuse that has taken place during the lockdown. It will be important to plan for this.

Some newly vulnerable children would not usually be considered vulnerable but have become so in the current circumstances as parents

are no longer able to manage. Schools have had to be resourceful in providing support for these families, for example by using charitable funding to provide food parcels.

Early years providers are concerned about the identification of vulnerable babies and young children. This frequently takes place through health visitor appointments, baby clinics and regular child health reviews, which have all ceased, and in some areas health visitors have been temporarily moved to work in adult services. We are concerned that the lockdown will lead to children's increased vulnerability at home, with regard to domestic violence, child and parent mental health, and children's behaviour, and that this is unlikely to be picked up for some months.

Parental mental health is a significant concern for schools and early years providers. This is due to increasing poverty in some families in both the short and the longer term. There has been a marked increase in families needing to access food banks and unable to pay utility bills. This, combined with increased domestic violence, is leading parents to be less able to parent well, resulting in further increases in child vulnerability.

For some looked-after children, contact with their birth families has improved during the lockdown, due to a move away from face to face meetings. For these children, contact has been more frequent and of better quality, and the children's well-being has also increased.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector:

Children's early development:

The closure of early years providers will have had unavoidable consequences for children's social skills, particularly for those children who are vulnerable or live in families with no other children. There is

concern about how some of these children will cope with returning to a social setting.

Closure of early years provision is likely to exacerbate income related child development gaps, which are already significant. Even though schools are working hard to support parents as educators, the lockdown has led to considerably reduced support for the home environment, including families' access to books and libraries. Many families do not have access to craft or other resource materials.

Although some provision (including some family support) has successfully moved online, this is not accessible to all families who need it. For example, some households have no computers or internet access. Much of the educational material provided is in English, which can be a problem for some families; some parents feel that their own standard of English is insufficient to support their children's learning. In Nottingham, local data suggest that 7.8% of families have no-one in a household who speaks English as a main language.

The lack of regular child development checks, combined with the closure of early years provision, has meant that young children's social and emotional problems are not being identified and these children are not benefitting from crucial early intervention. This is likely to lead to increased problems for them later on in life.

The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market:

As above, we anticipate that the inability for families to take up the early years funded entitlement during the lockdown will lead to a widening of income-related attainment gaps which will have long-term consequences for some children.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment:

Although we support the decision to cancel formal exams, the effects of this on the young people due to sit them are significant. The impact of losing the end of their study and the missed opportunity to prove to themselves how well they can do should not be underestimated. We have concerns about the fairness of the qualifications awarded. There is scope for schools to grade students in ways which benefit their data outcomes rather than being strictly fair to individual students. We also have concerns about the factoring in of prior school attainment when considering individual student grades. Applying this to individual student data could mean that hard working and talented young people in underachieving schools do not do as well as they deserve, because of the attainment of previous candidates from their schools. There is evidence that more able students from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely than those from advantaged backgrounds to have their grades under-predicted at A level; if this happens this year it will mean that these young people do not get the grades they deserve (Murphy and Wyness, 2020).

A Nottingham- and Nottinghamshire-wide survey of schools conducted by The Futures Group found that schools are concerned with ensuring that all Year 11 students have positive destinations. They are especially worried about disadvantaged students with little family support. Particularly for these students, it has been harder for colleges and sixth forms to provide transition support, and these providers are concerned that many of their new intake in September will have done no academic work since March. Students themselves are worried about induction in their new educational institutions.

For some more vulnerable students there have been difficulties with access to appropriate IT equipment and broadband, making studying difficult or impossible. It will be important for those institutions

receiving these students to identify them rapidly and put remedial support in place.

There are particular concerns for young people who do not attain Grade 4 in English and Maths GCSE this summer, as it is unclear how they will access courses or resit opportunities.

Support for pupils and families during closures:

The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning:

Schools have been working hard to support children and young people and to provide consistent messages about remote learning. However the messages given out need to be flexible enough to adapt to different conditions. Every family is an individual unit and all members may need to cope, respond and adapt to lockdown in a different way. Some families (particularly with children with complex needs) may need reassuring that they do not have to provide what would normally be the curriculum for their child.

It is important for key messages to reach parents through regular school-based communication channels. This allows them to be tailored to their local community needs, as well as ensuring that parents are only promised what can be implemented by their children's school. Because schools are aware that many families who have previously managing are now slipping into difficulty, they are ensuring that information about key local resources, such as food banks, is sent out to all parents.

We are concerned about the change to statutory provision for children with EHCPs from there being a requirement to ensure that what is specified is provided to there only having to be 'reasonable endeavours' to do this. Some therapists have used this provision to remove children permanently from their caseload, which means that

these children will no longer receive therapies deemed essential for their development. This leaves parents having to fight to get these reinstated once lockdown is over, and meanwhile the children will lose valuable time and input.

Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education:

We are concerned that the move to telephone and online provision for mental health services may not be as effective as face to face contact and has made it harder for child and adolescent mental health services to support their clients. This is likely to have put recovery processes on hold, or even reversed them. This will be the case both for initial access to services or ongoing therapeutic care.

We are also concerned that some young people may be 'suffering in silence' and not telling their parents or other adults about the deterioration in their mental health and wellbeing. In the absence of face to face contact with school staff this may well not be picked up, leading to further deterioration without intervention. There are concerns that teenagers in particular may suffer from a more online-focused social life, and that they may also find it harder to keep social distancing rules due to their tendency to riskier behaviour.

Schools have not been given much information about how to support children and young people's mental health, and are having to find resources themselves. Schools are also worried about parental mental health. They are doing their best to support families but are concerned that parents will continue to expect this level of support longer term in a situation in which they have no additional resources for it.

We are concerned that, with the move to online learning, the expressive curriculum has been squeezed out of children and young people's experience. In a face to face situation, this curriculum would provide opportunities for pupils to engage with how they think and

feel, to explore and empathise with the experiences of other young people, and to feel that they are part of a community of young writers (Dymoke, 2017). Without this aspect of the curriculum, young people are not being supported to develop openness, empathy and to talk about feelings such as fear, anxiety, loneliness and grief, which they may well be experiencing at close hand.

Many materials available for learning English online appear to offer little space or opportunity for the consideration of children and young people's mental health, at a time when they particularly need this support.

The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses:

While some apprenticeships are continuing, there is a huge drop in the number available. The results of a D2N2 enquiry found that some apprenticeship sectors, particularly health and digital, are carrying on almost as normal, but others, such as engineering and hospitality, have seen a sharp drop. Social care apprentices have been moved onto full-time work. Many firms who usually take apprentices have furloughed staff.

The effect of this on young people hoping to move onto apprenticeship will be devastating, and some will be left with no future plans. This will have particular impact on those who prefer 'hands-on' to academic learning. There may be knock-on implications for Further Education providers who will see a huge increase in young people wanting to go to college as a back-up plan. It is unclear both whether there will be sufficient places for these young people and what will happen to them if they are unable to access a college place.

Careers education is still being delivered by schools but inconsistently. Young people are anxious about their future plans, and some, who have not officially left education, are not receiving any careers

guidance at present. In Nottinghamshire, of 12 local providers for those young people not in education, employment or training, only three are currently operational, leaving these young people potentially without adequate support.

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families:

Although private nurseries have been supported to date by being able to furlough staff, there are concerns that in the medium term some will fail because parents are fearful about sending their children back into group settings. This will have a longer-term impact on the overall availability and access to early years education, leading to a shortage of provision, with knock-on effects on children's early development.

These settings are also a crucial part of the childcare system which allows parents to work. If they close, this will impede economic recovery.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need):

There will be huge long-term impact on disadvantaged groups, including those with special educational needs, lack of parental support, and financial disadvantage, due to widening attainment gaps as a result of the lockdown. This will go beyond children from families claiming free school meals, as those previously coping are now getting into difficulties.

As discussed above, the amended regulations regarding EHCPs will lead to further disadvantage to children and young people who have had specific therapies withdrawn with no plan for reinstatement.

Families claiming free school meals were not always able to access the funding. Some difficult to reach families cried when FSM funding was allocated via bank accounts after the failure of voucher provision. At least one Nottinghamshire secondary school purchased vouchers for families using school funds, when the Edenred-supplied vouchers failed to arrive. Some schools have allocated funds to providers supporting children in acute need but this is not sustainable in the longer term with current budgets.

Research (currently undergoing peer review) carried out by Professor Wood and colleagues suggests that children on free school meals are more likely to use school libraries. They used them for access to digital resources, a quiet place to work, and access to a wide range of books. Children who used school libraries were found to have higher reading confidence, greater enjoyment of reading, and longer periods spent reading than those who did not. They conclude that 'such activities may be critical in enabling FSM pupils to close the attainment gap'. The closure of schools has removed these young people's access to this important resource, with concomitant longer-term educational and attainment effects.

3. Recommendations: What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?

We need to learn from the successes seen from a wide variety of providers. A system should be put in place by the Committee to learn from those schools and children's social care providers who were most able to continue with strong support for children and young people.

Schools and children's social care providers should be trusted to provide what is necessary on the ground, within wider parameters set by Government. It should be recognised that every local area and

school is different and that local providers are best able to respond to the needs of children and young people in their local area. Local Authorities have an important role to play in this.

It should be recognised that being eligible for free school meals is not the only indicator of need. We need to plan for increased vulnerability in emergency situations – and after them – and to be aware that there will be many different ways in which children and young people are made vulnerable in emergencies.

In the current situation, schools and providers of children's social care rapidly put in place ways of working with vulnerable families remotely. These need to be developed fully and built more solidly into the national and local infrastructure.

Contingency plans should be put in place to ensure that all children and young people are able to access online learning in any similar future situation. This should include plans to provide internet access and computers to those families and children who do not have them, so that they have some chance of keeping up with their peers while schools are closed.

Teachers should be better trained in the provision of online content and delivery, and how to tailor it for their specific students.

There should be a national approach to planning for provision of online learning and development in an emergency situation. This might include: a bank of resources which all schools and teachers could adapt for their specific situations; online careers advice and guidance; virtual platforms across all skills sectors for virtual work experience. If this provision is sufficiently good, it may also be useful for supporting children and young people who find it hard to attend school regularly, for example, due to ongoing health conditions.

The education and children's social care sectors have shown themselves to be extremely resilient and have risen to multiple challenges. However, this has come at a cost to staff who have stepped up to these, for example keeping schools open for vulnerable children and children of key workers right through vacations and even bank

holidays. There needs to be some slack in the system to allow for future emergencies without completely exhausting staff. We are concerned that these staff will be burnt out in September and that there will be considerable staff sickness when schools return full time.

References:

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