

Responding to COVID-19: issues affecting services for children and young people

Briefing Note: 6, 25/06/20

This is the sixth in a series of briefings to share findings from our ongoing intelligence-gathering on the impact of COVID-19 on the children’s sector, based on issues that professionals are seeing in the course of their work. If you would like to be involved in this activity, please contact [Scott Compton](#) at The Children’s Society.

The form has been running since 6th April 2020 and had a total of 195 respondents up to 08/06/20. What follows reflects the key themes identified over the course of two weeks, between 27/05/20 – 08/06/20. However, this briefing also reflects some of the wider themes and ideas raised throughout the time the form has been in the field. All the briefings in this series are [accessible online](#).

We will continue to collect, collate and analyse responses through the pandemic. Please help us to collect as much evidence as possible on how COVID-19 is affecting frontline children’s service providers by [completing or sharing the evidence collection form](#).

This briefing is based on contributions from 24 individual respondents, over the course of two weeks, representing the following areas. (NB: respondents are able to choose multiple areas)	No. of respondents	Geographical reach	No. of respondents
Education	15	London	13
Family Support	13	North West	4
Mental Health	7	East	3
Child protection/safeguarding	7	South East	1
Children’s social care	3	South West	1
Youth Services	1		
Early Years provision	1		
Health	1		
Other	1		

Theme 1: Pre-existing structural issues

Research from the Children’s Service Funding Alliance shows that services for children and young people have been seriously affected by cuts over the last decade. Funding from central government has fallen whilst demand for the services has risen. The combined result has been a shift away from spending on early intervention services that enable professionals to step in before problems escalate, as local authorities are forced to prioritise spending on statutory services such as safeguarding and children in care. Evidence gathered via this form suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures are placing additional pressures on a system that was already at capacity. Respondents have told us that this has led to thresholds to access support being raised, services that are unable to take on new referrals and a negative impact on staff morale.

These longstanding issues came through in a number of responses. CAMHS services have often been reported as being severely overstretched with no spare capacity and constantly running in crisis mode, unable to do any preventative work. Respondents have reported that caseloads are too high in the children’s sector and that managing crises over the phone from home was particularly time consuming. This has been further exacerbated by staff shortages in the social care sector. The same respondent also highlighted how cuts to local services had resulted in long waiting lists and the large workloads were having a serious negative impact



on how workers are coping. – *“Staff morale and wellbeing is low, and people are feeling the pressure having to work at home and being impacted by the crisis as well in our own personal lives.”*

A related issue has been information sharing. One respondent highlighted concerns about bureaucratised decision-making processes in the NHS, along with complicated data protection regulations and other technical issues, that prevented communication with education, social care and youth justice systems. – *“We are totally hamstrung by data protection and technical divides...In the NHS we are swamped with box-ticking and covering our backs – blinded ‘risk’.”* The net result is that some respondents felt CAMHS were often not as agile and effective in meeting need as some third sector providers which can offer interventions in a more timely and flexible way.

Several respondents from the charity sector highlighted that short-term service commissioning was affecting their employees who were fearing redundancy as well as worrying about the impact of the families that they support. – *“it would be amazing if the government could sign off the extended contract which would give us planning guarantee and personal security.”*

A further important concern raised by respondents was that families with no recourse to public funds were struggling financially and were being systematically disadvantaged in the pandemic.

Possible solutions

- The Government should prioritise recruiting and retaining new child and family social workers in regions where there is a clearly identified need.
- The Government should explore how information can be shared more effectively between children’s social care, CAMHS and youth justice to provide safer and more integrated programmes of care for young people.
- The Department for Health should prioritise high quality, consistent supervision for front line social workers. It should also provide increased support for workers’ emotional wellbeing.
- The government should suspend the NRPF policy without further delay so that families can access the lifeline of social security under the same conditions as everyone else.
- The Government should confirm ongoing funding so that charities who are providing vital services on the front line can provide assurances for their staff and plan for future programmes of support.

Theme 2: Children and young people accessing support

The most vulnerable children are often not attending school and are therefore not able to access face-to-face time with teachers or support staff. Respondents agreed there was an urgent need for regular monitoring. There was also concern for children’s safety and wellbeing: parents who are already ambivalent about professionals intervening in their children’s care may use fears about the virus to disengage from support. – *“[We have been] unable to see children who are at risk as parents not allowing visitors into the home.”*

Digital exclusion also remains an ongoing issue with a number of respondents continue to highlight that many vulnerable children are still without a computer or reliable internet connection in the home. As a result, many are falling behind on homework and are uncontactable by mental health professionals. In one local authority, the transferring of free school meal vouchers online has been met with much of the same difficulty. – *“The free school meal packs within the Blackpool area worked well, although when transferring to the online vouchers we have more than doubled the amount of families who needed our assistance with accessing food banks. This is due to...the increasing number of people who have no access to the internet.”*

One respondent also noted that delivering household essentials to vulnerable families became complicated when workers did not have access to private means of transportation. Given the size and weight of the items, public transport was often not an option. – *“Having car problems meant that to continue to provide families with well needed provisions I had to rely and work around others to use their transport to conduct my work.”*

The overall sense was neatly summarised in one response, that there was a lack of well-funded services to signpost vulnerable children and families to. - *“Families should not have to rely on food banks and be kept in temporary accommodation for so long...The gap between those who have and those who don't have has become more noticeable during this period”. – “There is no service to work directly with children that have a substance using loved one”.*

Possible solutions

- Local authorities need to ensure they are staying in touch with those families that they are already worried about, particularly where there is a history of safeguarding concerns.
- The Government needs to provide sufficient PPE to social workers and their clients so that parents of vulnerable children can be reassured about the safety of home visits.
- Local authorities should consider providing private transport to professionals bringing vital supplies to vulnerable families. For example, through setting up a shared emergency taxi-booking account.
- The Government should consider making data bundles, internet routers and other equipment needed for online access, available to all vulnerable families to facilitate their education and emotional support from home.
- Local authorities should consider printing and posting free school meal vouchers to families as an alternative to transferring them online.

Theme 3: Return to school

How the re-opening of schools is managed and how vulnerable students are best supported was a further theme identified in the latest responses. Some respondents reported that many parents/carers and children remain highly anxious about returning, with a particular focus being on how schools would manage to maintain social distancing with large student numbers and limited space. – *“Just concerned about the social distancing in schools with young children will be effectively achieved.”* One respondent also raised the important question of what protocols staff would follow when removing and disposing of masks worn by children.

Another respondent highlighted that a number of schools were still not allowing visits from outside charities who usually offer one-to-one support in person to vulnerable students. Though the charity is continuing to offer support over the phone we know from numerous responses in previous weeks that the uptake of these services is often very limited in comparison, and so there may be many children going without the support they need. This is particularly the case for children with special educational needs (SEND), whose social and learning needs are most acute and will suffer if they are not able to access additional support. Where young people have cognitive, sensory or emotional difficulties in particular they may particularly benefit from the more personal face to face help, rather than that mediated by a screen.

Possible solutions

- The Department for Education (DfE) should publish clear guidelines for schools, these guidelines should include practical support on how to communicate safety information with parents and carers, provide health and safety information for all school staff and give schools the flexibility to allow non-essential staff to come in to school where considered necessary.

