

Written evidence submitted by Jeremy Horwood, Joanna Kesten, Judi Kidger, Beki Langford and Dr Ava Lorenc, University of Bristol

We are a team of researchers based at the University of Bristol/NIHR Applied Research Collaboration West. Over the summer we conducted the [Back to School study](#), which examined the views of young people, parents, carers and school staff about the experience of education during lockdown and their views on returning to school. We undertook a rapid analysis of data from interviews conducted between 15th July and 4th September 2020.

Participants included

- school staff (N=13) from seven schools - Heads/assistant Heads, teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs)
- Families from eight schools (N=20 parents/carers and 17 young people.) Young people were mostly from years 7/8/10. Twelve participants had Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

Our results speak to the issues raised by the inquiry, particularly around support for pupils and families during school closure and the impact on disadvantaged groups. All of the following information comes directly from our interviews with staff and families.

Support for pupils and families during school campus closures

Only one school had provided any 'live' online lessons for remote learning.

- Young people generally found home learning difficult. The main challenges were lack of teacher interaction/guidance, minimal/slow feedback, lack of motivation, and loss of structure to the day. Young people who already struggled with school found home learning especially difficult.
- Staff felt home learning was a poor substitute for face-to-face teaching, especially for older years. They described many limitations and challenges, including the need for additional staff time to prepare materials and IT expertise.
- Some benefits of home learning were also noted. These included fewer distractions, less stress for some young people, especially those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and some better family-teacher relationships.
- Staff reported a rise in safeguarding issues during school closure, including those related to domestic violence. They also anticipated a surge in reported issues once schools reopen.
- Government vouchers for families who receive free school meals arrived late. One school made their own provision, delivering food to families who needed it.

Disadvantaged groups

Lower socioeconomic groups

Staff were concerned that lockdown would increase the gap in educational attainment for families of lower socioeconomic status who had poorer access to space and technology for

home learning. Learning for young people without computers/internet was particularly affected. The provision of laptops from the government was inadequate and came too late. Paper copies of work were sent out to these students, but could not be returned for assessment.

Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) communities

Staff were concerned about young people from BAME families returning to school due to the potential for them to spread Covid-19 to family members, given the additional risk of Covid-19 to BAME groups. Some BAME families were also concerned about this, and some felt these had not been adequately dealt with by the school.

Students with special educational needs (SEN)/mental health issues

There was consensus among staff that returning to school under the Covid-19 risk reduction measures would be particularly challenging for young people with SEN/mental health issues, for the following reasons:

- SEN students being unable to access the separate area of the school they usually go to when in crisis.
- Concern that learning support assistants will not be able to cross year group bubbles.
- SEN students often over-worry about change so will be anxious about the multiple changes implemented.
- SEN students are often tactile and will miss the soft spaces which have been removed as posing a Covid-19 risk.
- Students with (social) anxiety who haven't left the house during lockdown may find socialising difficult.
- How schools will provide equal provision for students who will not be attending due to shielding or shielding family members, or school refusers.
- Students with poor connectedness to school, low attendance and/or poor access to learning during lockdown may struggle with the return to school or may not attend at all.

One staff member was concerned about unknown long-term impact of lockdown on young peoples' mental health and capacity to learn.

Exams

- Staff and families' lack of trust in the government was most often attributed to the government's repeated U-turns on exam grades.
- Students going into exam years were concerned about how they were going to 'catch-up', and some had received very little information from school on this issue. Some staff mentioned a lack of guidance from Ofqual on how to manage this.
- One staff member was happy with teacher-assessed grades and felt that this gave a more accurate grade for their students who often struggle with the pressure around exams.

Suggestions from participants to support learning as schools re-open

Parents, young people and staff suggested a range of measures that would help:

- Using the principles of a 'recovery agenda', possibly a 'trauma-informed response' e.g. <https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk>
- A slow transition period to allow young people adjust to the new processes and rules.
- Risk assessments and clear communication from school for vulnerable young people.
- A 'no blame culture' for work not done during home learning, and catch-up provision for learning that has been missed.
- That the school work with staff with mental health expertise, and collaborate with external organisations who have expertise in supporting children, including those with behavioural and mental health issues.
- Staff need clear, nuanced, timely government guidance/advice, including case studies, developed with input from schools. To include guidance on PPE, exams, local lockdowns, dealing with young people's difficulties (such as anxiety about Covid-19/returning to school, bereavement, safeguarding issues), and supporting students with SEN.
- Guidance and funding for catch-up teaching.
- Staff also suggested directive guidance from local authorities, so schools don't have to independently plan how to comply with government regulations, and local-specific information e.g. Covid-19 infection rates and measures.
- Staff suggested funding, particularly for: emotional support for young people; learning equipment; cleaning products; hand sanitiser; PPE. Additional staff (e.g. supply teachers) and space (e.g. church halls) would also help, especially regarding the needs of young people with SEN.
- Clear and regular communication from schools about the changes made is important to reassure parents.

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