

Written evidence submitted by the Institute of Education, University of Reading

Briefing document for Select Committee submission

The views of families and education professionals on how good use of networks and resources can help to respond to the needs of vulnerable children during the COVID-19.

Dr Anna Tsakalaki, Institute of Education, University of Reading submitting evidence to respond to the call 'The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services'.

Introduction and executive summary with key points:

1. **About us:** This report reflects on the findings of a collaborative project run by researchers at the University of Reading. We are an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the Institute of Education and the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences specialising in the education of SEND, wellbeing and mental health, and the experiences of young people with learning difficulties. For more information about our profiles, see our website: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/about-us/>
2. **Our goal:** In this project we aim to document good practice in home-schooling/distance learning and wellbeing/mental health of vulnerable children during the COVID-19 lockdown to inform policy planning for reopening of schools. The present report shows how the Government can further employ and reinforce practices developed during the lockdown to address the learning and wellbeing needs of vulnerable children during this pandemic but also adopt successful practices for better provision beyond just this period of uncertainty. For this project we used the categorisation of vulnerable children and youth as presented in governmental guidance during the pandemic¹. In the present report, we focus specifically on practices relevant to fostering networks, deploying resources, modifying learning patterns and training stakeholders. For all our results see: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/summary-of-findings/>
3. **Background information:** Professionals and families were in many cases already struggling to meet their vulnerable children's learning and mental health needs even before the pandemic due to the difficulties in financial sustainability of the established system². The Government did issue additional funding during the pandemic to address the unprecedented circumstances of living and learning for the most vulnerable. An example is the multi-million-pound settlement to help meet the learning needs of children with complex needs from low-income families during the pandemic³. However, in order to make sure that funding is

¹ Department for Education. (2020). *Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures/guidance-for-schools-about-temporarily-closing>

² National Audit Office. (2019, September). *Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England*. (HC 2636). Department for Education.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Support-for-pupils-with-special-education-needs.pdf>

³ Department for Education and Ford, V. (2020, May 19). *£37 million to support children with complex needs*. [Press Release] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/37-million-to-support-children-with-complex-needs>

utilised efficiently we need to know what their exact needs are and what practices we need to invest in for successful addressing of these needs.

Significance of findings:

4. The significance of our findings lies in that they reveal the power of networks and successful deployment of resources to address the needs of vulnerable children during the first surge of the pandemic. They, therefore, contribute to creating the evidence base in order to channel governmental funding to where it is needed the most and help policy makers to reinforce successful practice for the benefit of the most vulnerable, who often struggle the most under circumstances of crisis⁴. Our results help to:
 - 4.1 find ways to **direct funding** where it is most needed, and
 - 4.2 re-think the way **human and material resources are deployed**.
5. As the effects of this pandemic will undoubtedly be long-lasting and may extend beyond the life of it, we propose policy changes for a more sustainable system of provision during this pandemic but also beyond it. Based on our findings we propose:
 - 5.1 reinforcing **collaboration of stakeholders**, and
 - 5.2 systematising more **flexible educational practices**.

Sample and main findings:

6. **Sample:** The views of participants were captured between April-July 2020 during the first surge of COVID-19 in order to record the spontaneous response of the education sector and families to the unprecedented learning circumstances caused by the national lockdown. The findings presented in this report come from a sample of 76 families/carers or foster carers and 63 practitioners working in education or social care for children listed as vulnerable during the COVID-19 outbreak⁵. Our sample was sourced from the South and South West of England and included professionals working in schools and local authorities in different roles (from teaching assistant to manager of a team or Head of a setting) and families/carers of children spanning pre-primary to post-16 education. Types of schooling included mainstream and special schools covering from LA maintained settings to multi-academy trusts and permanent home-schooling. High percentages in both groups of participants worked or cared for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). High percentages were also accrued for children with an in-need/protection plan, looked after children, children assessed as otherwise vulnerable during the COVID-19 outbreak, and children of keyworkers. About one third of practitioners also worked with children that had English as an Additional Language (EAL). For a more detailed presentation of our sample see: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/summary-of-findings/>
7. **Themes:** The findings that this report discusses respond to the following questions posed by the present call for evidence:
 - 7.1 The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.

⁴ Excluded lives: Daniels, H., Thompson, I., Porter, J., Tawell, A., Emery, H. (2020, June). *School exclusion risks after COVID-19*. University of Oxford. http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Daniels-et-al.-2020_School-Exclusion-Risks-after-COVID-19.pdf

⁵ Department for Education. (2020). *Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-school-closures/guidance-for-schools-about-temporarily-closing>

- 7.2 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).
- 7.3 Support for vulnerable pupils and families during closures, including:
- 7.3.1 The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning
- 7.3.2 Children’s and young people’s mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education
- 7.4 What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency.
- 7.5 In addition, our findings go beyond the set questions to explore how families responded to the needs of their children, since the lockdown resulted in shifting educational responsibilities from schools to families. This will help us understand how the role of families can be supported better in a future national emergency but also how the educational system can benefit from their engagement more permanently for better results in provision for vulnerable children.

In the following sections, we are going to cite question numbers next to relevant findings for easier interpretation.

8. **Overview of study:** Our findings support claims about disproportionate chances for inequality in the learning experiences of pupils with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds reported elsewhere^{6,7} as well as a high risk of developing anxiety and reluctance to re-join formal schooling⁸. Our sample expands these by including other categories of vulnerable children (see section 5 above). Detailed findings can be found on our website per area of interest (practices during the outbreak, learning, mental health/wellbeing, meeting children’s needs, and reopening schools): <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/summary-of-findings/>.
9. **Focus of this report:** In the present report we present selected findings to show how practitioners and families **utilised their resources, knowledge and network under the pressure of school closures** so as to respond to the needs of their children during the first surge of the pandemic. We **identify gaps** but also **highlight good practice**, such as ways that practitioners and families found to provide accessible learning materials, learn from and communicate with each other, develop multi-agency connections, engage and support families more in their children’s learning and find more flexible ways of working. In summary, we found that a side effect of the national lockdown 2020 was that families became educators of their vulnerable children, a role which they exercised to a different extent depending on confidence and support from school. We saw that practitioners utilised their connections with their peers to repurpose resources, exchange knowledge and direct

⁶ VIEW. (2020, June). *The impact of COVID-19 on education and children’s services - response from VIEW relating to education professionals working with children and young people with vision impairment* (CIE0183). <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6203/pdf/>

⁷ Andrew, A. et al. (2020). *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children’s experiences during home learning*. The Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://mk0nuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/BN288-Learning-during-the-lockdown-1.pdf>

⁸ Daniels, H., Thompson, I., Porter, J., Tawell, A., Emery, H. (2020, June). *School exclusion risks after COVID-19*. University of Oxford. http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Daniels-et-al.-2020_School-Exclusion-Risks-after-COVID-19.pdf

available funding in order to respond quickly to the demands of the new learning and safeguarding circumstances. Finally, the lockdown demanded for regular communication between families and schools, which in some cases resulted in an improvement in their relationship.

10. Based on these results, we suggest ways to **systematise, support and further develop good practice** both at policy level but also at day-to-day-practice level so that settings and children's services are proactive in their planning continuously during this pandemic, and in case of any future emergency. In addition, we argue that these successful practices should become permanent fixtures for better educational provision for vulnerable children beyond emergency situations.

Key findings for policy consideration:

11. Networks and sense of community

- 11.1 Isolation and vulnerability: Practitioners and families felt that their children were more vulnerable than the general student population. About half of the sample felt that the lockdown affected vulnerable children (e.g., increased anxiety levels), which is in agreement with similar findings recorded elsewhere⁹. When asked whether they felt vulnerable themselves, families admitted feeling vulnerable more frequently in comparison with practitioners. Professionals' main worry was safety from COVID-19. Both groups feared that isolation during the lockdown could have a negative impact on theirs and their children's mental health (Q: 7.2, 7.3.2).
- 11.2 Meeting vulnerable children's needs: About one half of our sample agreed that the circumstances of the lockdown made them more alert about their children's needs, while the other half reported being already aware about these. About 50% of each group were regularly or frequently worried about meeting the children's needs during the outbreak having considered available resources, costs, staff, expertise and change in priorities (e.g., hygiene, keeping social distance) (Q: 7.1, 7.5).
- 11.3 Sense of community: Practitioners appeared to experience a new sense of community during the COVID-19 outbreak more often than families. Only 8% of families reported having discovered other people with same interests/difficulties and/or experts. When experienced, this new sense of community included communicating with peers, exchanging advice and support. However, about 40% from both groups agreed that this new sense is a natural human response to situations of crisis and were unsure if they could benefit from it once the pandemic is over. Another 30-40% neither agreed nor disagreed. Overall, their answers show that this new sense of community was not solidly established in the cycles of vulnerable families and practitioners working with them in the first few months of the pandemic (Q: 7.2, 7.5).
- 11.4 Accessing and offering support to the community: Practitioners' responses showed that over half of the settings in our sample were able to respond to their vulnerable learners' needs using existing resources and without extra support from volunteers. However, volunteers played a significant role in supporting vulnerable children for 1/3 of the schools in our sample. Participants from both groups reported volunteering outside work or home to support settings and community members according to their skills and availability. On the other hand, respondents that were not able to volunteer mentioned a rise in their caring

⁹ *ibid*

responsibilities for their immediate and extended family which didn't leave much time and strength for them to offer further support to the community (Q: 7.3, 7.5).

11.5 Teacher-family collaboration:

11.5.1 Practitioners and families agreed that a high proportion of vulnerable children started home-schooling due to the outbreak. Practitioners reported keeping in regular contact with families. However, significantly fewer families reported regular or frequent interaction with schools, which perhaps shows a difference in how professionals and families perceived frequency of communication. Exchanging information about the child's progress, wellbeing, mental health, and health was the most popular purpose for interaction according to both groups of participants. They also discussed other focal points of discussion including smoother transition back to formal schooling. In many cases a parent became the main person responsible for distance learning either by monitoring completion of set tasks sent by the child's teacher or by engaging in their child's learning more actively (e.g., helping, demonstrating, choosing tasks) (Q: 7.1-7.3).

11.5.2 At the opposite end, families that did not get consistent support from their school reported hovering in uncertainty about how to meet their children's needs during the lockdown. Qualitative responses of these families but also of teaching professionals revealed tensions between schools, families and local authorities. Such tensions have been reported in the past in SEND education in relation to assessment procedures and identification of SEND in children¹⁰. Factors mentioned in the report by the SEN Policy Research Forum as creating problematic communication include financial pressures, lack of funding and a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities of stakeholders (e.g., schools vs LA). The outbreak of COVID-19 found state education systems around the world shocked by the demands of unavoidable national lockdowns. The UK was no exception in terms of releasing funding, defining roles and deploying appropriate resources, which seem to have fueled existing tensions between families, schools and LAs. However, qualitative responses from both professionals and families in our sample discussed cases of dedicated staff in schools and children services putting extra time and effort to catch up with new procedures and provide support to families that struggled with learning and mental health during the lockdown. This is in line with practices reported before the lockdown for SEND provision as shown by a recent National Audit Office report¹¹.

11.6 Peer-to-peer collaboration:

11.6.1 In response to the emergency, practitioners were quick to ask for advice from and share resources with their professional community either locally or through professional networks and online groups. A higher percentage of practitioners reported interacting with each other to share materials and skills in comparison with families, many of whom appeared more isolated and lacking a supportive network to help them address the needs of their children. Professionals trusted peers that they considered more knowledgeable in areas like educational technologies, and specific learning needs. In addition, a high proportion of practitioners reported having regular or frequent support from colleagues on wellbeing and mental health of students and staff in their settings (Q: 7.1, 7.3, 7.5).

¹⁰ SEN Policy Research Forum. (2020, September). *Trends in SEN identification: contexts, causes and consequences*. <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Identification-policy-paper-Sept-20.pdf>

¹¹ National Audit Office. (2019, September). *Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England*. (HC 2636). Department for Education.

11.6.2 The percentage of families that collaborated with other families was significantly lower. Practitioners were more confident than families in knowing where to seek support for wellbeing and mental health. Significantly, there was about one third of the group of families that reported being sure of where to seek support rarely or never. Qualitative responses showed that there were cases of families that were not aware of where to go for help but their child's school, which highlights the very important role that schools played during the lockdown for distributing information and providing support. This places a huge responsibility on schools that, similarly to before the lockdown era, relied a lot on the good will of their staff, struggled with funding and human resources and often suffered from a lack of support themselves^{12,13,14}. Where family-to-family collaboration flourished, one main focus was finding tailored learning materials for distance learning. Families also shared knowledge on current practices by comparing provision in different schools and local authorities to better navigate the provision system under the new circumstances (e.g., assessment during lockdown, access to additional funding). Family-to-family collaboration through campaign groups and social media is reported as regular practice for families of children with SEND from before the lockdown, as for example with regards to navigating local authorities' assessment procedures¹⁵. Our findings show that families continued to trust other families for information and guidance during the lockdown as this proved to be a successful strategy in the past (Q: 7.1, 7.3, 7.5).

12. Use of resources

12.1 Confidence in digital learning: About one third of both groups said educational practices during the lockdown resulted in them changing their opinions about digital learning (Q: 7.1-7.2). A high proportion of both groups reported being confident in finding and using digital learning resources and improving their skills with use. Finally, 1/10 of practitioners and about 1/5 of families were not feeling confident at all and were seeking support from others. About 1/5 of both groups were feeling able to support others in that respect. About 1/5 of both groups said they felt confident in finding/using resources tailored to their children's specific needs (Q: 7.1, 7.2, 7.5).

12.2 Training/guidance: Practitioners reported having extra training in the use of digital learning resources and 1/5 of families said that they received guidance from their child's setting or their Local Authority on how to support digital learning at home. Another 1/5 of our family sample reported not being given any significant guidance which hindered their ability to feel in control of their child's learning during the lockdown. Qualitative responses showed that there were also cases of families that were not aware of the support they could get from other agents, such as charities specialising in their child's needs, which further highlights the demand for better guidance for families (Q: 7.1, 7.5).

¹² Ainscow, M. (2019, June). The British government is failing pupils with special needs – here's how to change that. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-british-government-is-failing-pupils-with-special-needs-heres-how-to-change-that-118143>

¹³ Tissot, C. & Tsakalaki, A. (2019, September). Schools are failing pupils with special needs, despite best efforts of dedicated staff. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/schools-are-failing-pupils-with-special-needs-despite-best-efforts-of-dedicated-staff-123400>

¹⁴ Tsakalaki, A. (2019, December). Dedicated staff are not enough: barriers to learning for pupils with special needs persist 5 years after introducing SEND reform. *Public Sector Focus*. <https://publicsectorfocus.com/2019/12/dedicated-staff-are-not-enough-barriers-to-learning-for-pupils-with-special-needs-persist-5-years-after-introducing-send-reform/900/>

¹⁵ SEN Policy Research Forum. (2020, September). *Trends in SEN identification: contexts, causes and consequences*. <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Identification-policy-paper-Sept-20.pdf>

12.3 Use of learning materials: One side effect of the introduction of distance learning during the lockdown for about 1/3 of both groups was a change in the way they sourced and evaluated learning materials. The criteria mostly used to choose materials are relevant to accessibility, appropriateness for independent learning and ease of monitoring effectiveness of learning¹⁶. Some families highlighted inadequacy of learning materials sent by their child's school to address their specific learning needs, which in many cases were different from the needs of their peers. Some professionals from schools and local authorities reported helping families with no access to electronic devices or the internet by providing devices, where possible, or producing printouts as close to digital tasks as possible. These difficulties often resulted in lower levels of engagement and reduced learning time. Most families reported that their children depended on an adult to complete the learning tasks. The level of dependence varied from 100% dependent to 100% independent learning depending on age and educational needs of the child. Qualitative responses from some families discussed not having enough guidance on how to use the digital materials and not having enough expertise to monitor their children's learning. Having taken on largely the role of home-schooling their child, families said that during the lockdown they engaged in modifying the tasks sent to their child by the school or looking for more suitable materials online. In this respect, there were common places where practitioners and families went to source learning materials. The most popular places were already trusted depositories used by teaching professionals before the pandemic (e.g., TES, BBC) and the Oak National Academy, a depository funded by the Government to respond to the specific learning circumstances of the lockdown¹⁷. Some families also followed recommendations of learning resources from charities with expertise in their child's needs and from their community (e.g., fellow parents, family networks on social media). Both groups of participants reported that the educational demands of the lockdown resulted in broadening their repertoire of places to source learning resources. They also agreed in many of the criteria they used to source and evaluate appropriateness of materials¹⁸. This furthers previous claims of families that they are knowledgeable in what their children's learning needs are^{19,20} and shows that they can respond competently to the challenge of becoming the educator of their own child if circumstances demand (Q: 7.1, 7.3.1, 7.5).

12.4 Effectiveness of new technologies: More than half of the sample agreed that new technologies contributed a lot on interacting with others, keeping optimistic and supporting each other. About the same proportion of each group reported having gained confidence in the effectiveness of new technologies to support their children's needs. In some cases, children were reported to engage more in learning in the safety of their home as there was less distraction than when at school. However, there is still a good proportion of practitioners and families that did not see much benefit in the use of new technologies that were introduced during the lockdown. There were families reporting that their children did

¹⁶ For a hierarchical representation of all criteria, see our website: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/learning-2/>

¹⁷ For a full list of depositories used to source learning materials during the lockdown, see our website: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/resources-and-support-for-you/>

¹⁸ For a hierarchical representation of all criteria, see our website: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/learning-2/>

¹⁹ SEN Policy Research Forum. (2020, September). *Trends in SEN identification: contexts, causes and consequences*. <https://senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Identification-policy-paper-Sept-20.pdf>

²⁰ Daniels, H., Thompson, I., Porter, J., Tawell, A., Emery, H. (2020, June). *School exclusion risks after COVID-19*. University of Oxford. http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Daniels-et-al.-2020_School-Exclusion-Risks-after-COVID-19.pdf

not have access to electronic devices, or if they did, they refused to engage with some forms of digital learning that flourished during the lockdown. One example was synchronous online class teaching which failed to capture the attention of some children for long or to facilitate interaction with their teacher and peers. Overall, practitioners were more on board with the idea of using social media than families. Perhaps this is due to teachers' previous familiarity with new technologies for educational purposes or the fact that teachers were expected to engage with them to encourage learning progress of their students during the lockdown. However, it is worth noticing that about a third of the sample remained indecisive about the effectiveness of the use of technologies for learning and socialising during the lockdown. These findings show that the lockdown gave a huge push to digital learning but a lot more refining of resources, tailoring to specific needs, systematising and training needs to happen before both professionals and families feel confident about its effectiveness in meeting their children's needs (Q: 7.1, 7.3.1).

13. Transition to formal schooling

13.1 New normality: The notion of 'new normality' was difficult to imagine for more than half of our sample while about ¼ of the sample remained indecisive about whether it would be different from life before the outbreak (Q: 7.1-7.2).

13.2 Transition to formal schooling: About half of practitioners and families were worried about vulnerable children's transition to formal schooling. Qualitative responses discussed their main worries, which were relevant to the time needed for smooth transition, social challenges of re-joining formal education and safety from COVID-19. Practitioners and families agreed that safe reopening was not possible at the time of the survey and that the voices of stakeholders should be heard when it comes to reopening (Q: 7.1-7.2).

Recommendations:

14. Based on the findings presented above we suggest the following for a successful response to a second surge of COVID-19, any future national emergency that may have similar outcomes but also effective permanent provision for vulnerable children in the UK (Q: 7.4):

14.1 **Systematisation and reinforcement of networks for education professionals and for families.** Our findings show how both groups drew from the knowledge, expertise and availability of their immediate community but also reached out to local and national groups for advice. It has been shown that networks can be a major agent of support offering operational solutions to procedural problems, practical exchange of resources and knowledge, but also a sense of community of people addressing similar challenges with communal efforts. Systematisation and reinforcement of networks can be done by:

14.1.1 Encouraging creation of specialised networks of professionals and families of vulnerable children at a local and a national level. We saw that mostly families felt more isolated and struggled with knowing where to go for help. Peer-to-peer groups would help in exchanging expertise and resources and we recommend their formation for quicker response to day-to-day challenges. However, our results also show that the long-term effects of this pandemic would be better addressed with collaboration of all three agents, i.e., schools, local authorities and families. This way information will flow faster, which will help responding quicker to the children's needs. Multi-agency collaboration means that all parties can benefit from the knowledge and skills of others, something that is already recommended by policy documents in the field of SEND²¹. In many cases

this was not achieved during the COVID-19 outbreak. We recommend that multi-agency networks are created and organically developed networks are reinforced at local and national level for a better response to the current pandemic but also more effective provision for vulnerable children in the future.

- 14.1.2 Funding should be directed to create, organise and maintain those networks. Our findings extend reports of the past highlighting the financial struggles in provision for vulnerable children²². The funding made available during the pandemic was a very positive development. Our findings help to identify the significant role that networks played during the first surge of the COVID-19 in responding to this population's needs and strongly suggest that governmental funding should be dedicated to creating sustainable networks for professionals and families. Sustainability is guaranteed by securing funding not only for initiation but also for maintenance of these networks.
- 14.1.3 Ensuring collaboration between policy makers (e.g., the Department for Education) and these networks. Our results show that professionals and families trusted their peers for information and advice more than governmental guidance. Schools have played a major role in channelling communication between stakeholders, planning, devising and delivering provision for vulnerable children. They need to be well supported in order to continue to do this effectively and sustainably. Moreover, families and practitioners in our sample loudly expressed their willingness to be heard when decisions are taken about next steps, as for example in the case of transition to formal schooling. We strongly recommend that there is an open channel of communication between multi-agency networks and policy makers to ensure effective response to their needs and smooth adaptation to new procedures and policies.

14.2 Creation and systematisation of appropriate resources.

- 14.2.1 The lockdown showed that in this emergency the bulk of learning resources was drawn from what schools already had or could find easily to cover as wide of the schooling population as possible. If accessible digital resources were not available from the beginning, tailoring to the needs of vulnerable children happened at a second stage by teachers or family members responsible for the children's learning during the lockdown. In order to address a second surge or a future national emergency, accessible learning resources must be created taking into account the needs of children falling under the 'vulnerable' category. These may vary from sub-group to sub-group and this variation should be considered when creating the resources. Our findings show that schools, local authorities and families are knowledgeable in different areas regarding their children's needs. Families often raised a concern about suitability of digital learning resources suggested by their school for their children. We propose that one of the focal points of multi-agency collaboration as suggested in point 13.1 of this report should be exchange of knowledge among stakeholders to create new accessible learning materials or to review existing resources for better alignment with vulnerable children's needs. Universities should play a significant role in this process, as they possess specialised knowledge and expertise to support production of evidence informed learning resources. Expert researchers and educators should be involved to ensure learning materials are research informed and reflect latest developments in specialised fields.

²¹ Department for Education & Department of Health and Social Care. (2014). *SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years* (DFE-00205-2013). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>

²² National Audit Office. (2019, September). *Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England*. (HC 2636). Department for Education.

14.2.2 Systematisation of appropriate resources can be achieved by matching accessible learning materials with the curriculum and creating a depository for open access materials. Our findings show that practitioners preferred using materials they already had or sourced from places they trusted (colleagues, approved online spaces). The same was true for families, who often reported not knowing where to go for materials that address the learning needs of their children. It is, therefore, essential that there is a main depository with accessible cross-curricular and research informed materials that practitioners and families trust. Open access and possibility for evaluation by users would enable accessibility to high quality learning resources tailored to vulnerable children's needs.

14.2.3 Deployment of human resources was also affected according to our findings. During the lockdown and transition back to school in September 2020, practitioners in settings and local authorities were heavily occupied with assessing risk, safeguarding and managing distance learning, so there was a greater demand for staff with experience in those areas. Staff, from SENCos to teaching assistants, were redeployed in different posts and given additional responsibilities to fulfil these needs. About 50% of staff in our sample reported working overtime sometimes or regularly while caring for or home-schooling members of their family. It is, therefore, proposed that funding is directed to reinforcing staff in key posts at schools and local authorities, that training is provided and that communication with policy makers is continuous to ensure that practitioners are confident in delivering sustainable provision throughout this period of uncertainty. On the other hand, redeployment and change in responsibilities may have given opportunities to staff and families to develop new interests, abilities and skills. We suggest that these opportunities are exploited by enabling new synergies, training and movement of staff within and across services for the benefit of provision for vulnerable children now and for the future.

14.3 **Training for all stakeholders involved in provision for vulnerable children.** Our findings showed that the first source that schools, local authorities and families turned to in order to respond to the new circumstances was the knowledge, skills and resources they already had from before the lockdown. In many cases, these were not enough to meet the needs of their children, as for example their skills in the specific technological means that were widely used during the first surge of the pandemic, their expertise in tailoring learning tasks to the specific needs of vulnerable learners and in supporting the mental health of their children. Gaps in training have been identified in the past, as for example is a need for specific training in SEND during Initial Teacher Training. A side effect of the pandemic was the opportunity for all parties involved in provision for vulnerable children to reassess their training needs. It is now a good time for the Government to respond to these needs by organising systematic and regular training in a range of areas as needed to respond to the complexity of the circumstances, from safeguarding procedures to management of human resources, to tailoring digital materials to specific learning needs, to supporting mental health of children and adults. External agencies can play a role in providing specialised training in targeted areas. We suggest that Universities with their cut edge research and long experience in teacher training are most suitable to play a significant role now by sharing their expertise with professionals and families in regular systematic training sessions. Relevant programmes have been recently announced by the European Commission with the scope to enhance connectivity and digital skills for all to overcome challenges brought by the pandemic, see for example Digital Education Action Plan²³.

14.4 Flexible learning and working patterns. Our findings showed that during the lockdown learning and working patterns changed alongside lifestyle of education professionals and families with children of school age. Our respondents reported having to work around caring responsibilities for their immediate and extended family while home-schooling their children. Both groups agreed that home-schooling during the pandemic took different forms depending on a variety of factors, such as collaboration between stakeholders and ability of families to monitor learning alongside their other responsibilities. Respondents appreciated the need for flexibility in learning and working patterns both during the lockdown and in transition to regular schooling. Development of social skills, sense of community and character education were highlighted as assets of formal education by many. On the other hand, there were cases where vulnerable pupils benefitted from learning in the safety of their home without distractions and from taking control over their learning schedule. Although families were keen for their children to return to formal schooling when it was safe to do so, they suggested that a form of flexi-schooling may be more effective for vulnerable children not only during the transitional period right after the lockdown but as a more permanent fixture. Many professionals reported having developed their confidence in flexible working and using new technologies for educational purposes. The COVID-19 pandemic helped to approach academic curricula more flexibly and may have shown us a new route in provision for vulnerable children that combines high quality teaching with more flexibility in learning and working and a balance between academic achievement and wellbeing. We suggest that this new route is explored further by schools and policy makers and its benefits are exploited during a second surge but also as a more permanent fixture for more sustainable provision for this population.

14.5 Mental health support for families raising and professionals working with vulnerable children. A good proportion of our sample considered this population to be more vulnerable under the present circumstances than the general schooling population. Many families also admitted feeling vulnerable themselves, some reported not knowing where to go for help and a few experienced isolation from the community. Professionals were in general more confident in their ability to address their mental health needs but they raised individual concerns about managing an ever changing situation and feeling the augmented tension between education staff and families. According to their responses, they compensated by sharing their thoughts with and listening to each other, stepping in to relieve overloaded colleagues or reaching out to professional networks for support. In order to achieve effective mental health support for children, it is essential that their immediate environment is also supported. It is, therefore, imperative that support by mental health experts for adults working with or raising vulnerable children is reinforced and systematised especially during this period of uncertainty. As the effects of this pandemic will undoubtedly be long-lasting, adults need to develop a toolkit of strategies to respond to the high demands of the current situation with an eye to possible effects in the future. It is essential that continuous mental health support for them is prioritised by offering expert individualised advice, training and planning for response to possible future scenarios.

15. Further research is needed:

²³ Mitchell, N. (2020, October 2). EU action plan for digital skills for all broadly welcomed. *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20201003010729135>

In this report we discussed how sustainable networks and accessible resources can help in better learning and wellbeing provision for vulnerable children and youth. The second phase of our project explores how families and practitioners address transition to the school year 2020-21, what practices prove to be successful and where gaps persist. For new findings go to our website:

<http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vulnerable-children-covid-19/>

As the long-term impact of this pandemic unfolds, there is a need for more extensive and deeper research into what works well and where gaps are in the day-to-day learning and wellbeing of vulnerable children, their families and professionals that work with them. Knowing where to direct funding and communal effort will help to address their needs better and quicker as they arise. Expert institutions such as Universities with a strong research profile and expertise are in the best place to initiate and manage further research in the field.

October 2020

October 2020