

Written evidence submitted by Ms Rachael Frossell

Context

- We are a well established Alternative Education Provider with 3 locations covering Bedfordshire & Northamptonshire.
- We work with young people from aged 5 through to 20 and our intervention uses horses and the outdoors to help most vulnerable to overcome their barriers to learning and engage back into education.
- We have worked with more than 4000 yp (young people) in 14 years of trading
- Our commissioners include Local Authorities (Central and Beds Borough, Luton, Northamptonshire, Cambridgeshire) Schools, Parents and other agencies working with vulnerable children
- We are a City and Guilds Accredited Centre & were runners up in the Rural Business Awards in 2019 for the East Region
- We employed 18 staff members as of 22nd March 2020.
- Our business was profitable, growing, but most importantly WORKING in its key aim to support yp to turn their lives around.

Critical Workers

We are deemed critical workers as many yp who attend our provision (more than 100 each week) fall into the Governments “vulnerable” criteria. However our commissioners had varying interpretations of what that meant. Some had already asked us for our CV19 Contingency Plan but others frowned upon us for keeping our doors open when the priority was to stay home.

We did and have remained open at our delivery sites and have continued to see some learners. Now (1st May) we are starting to see numbers increase. Many learners are not able to access us due to issues with transport, having to self isolate as members of their families are vulnerable or showing signs of CV or they are not able to be contacted.

We have furloughed 70% of our coaching team and have them coming back on a rota system. It is very difficult for those who are working as they have to cover multiple roles and hours are long.

We agreed to top up to 100% all staff salaries for those furloughed for the first 2 months and continue to do this for all who are “available” for work. We have 3 who are not available due to underlying health conditions or they are choosing not to return right now.

We have set up a learner support line, a private instagram page and online videos to reach out to those who cannot get to us to access their sessions at the moment. We are trying to give multiple touch points for the most vulnerable to reach us for support. We are learning and developing new skills daily.

Children services are doing their best in most situations I feel, but the sheer numbers of children who are not in school is a test for them. For us it has been hard sometimes to make contact with the people who can actually give us answers, but that is improving.

Support for Pupils and Families during Closures.

Messages across schools and local authorities has been inconsistent. Our priority has been to ensure attendance since all of our learners do not engage in learning at school and many do not have appropriate home situations to support any kind of learning from home.

We have focused our efforts on reaching out (where schools allow) to helping schools or learners directly to access some support or education from us. The learner help line has assisted in this process, but again, as we cannot always contact schools and where we have, we have had to rely on them sending details out to families, the chain of communication is too slow and too long. The few number of teachers in schools has seemed to make those who are working more stretched.

Children Mental Health and Safety

95% of children who access our provision suffer from some kind of SEMH issue. The lockdown is damaging for them in all of the ways we are hearing in the press. They are at risk from dangers in the home and on the streets. Schools or organisations like ours offer lifelines that they do not have elsewhere.

I am unsure where some of the learners are and what is happening in their lives. We have had a steady stream still returning which is a good thing.

We have also seen an increase in urgent new referrals which we have stepped up to support.

Education and qualifications.

We operate City and Guilds based courses but learners do not attend our provision for their main education so we cannot comment on GCSEs.

Some of the learners were on track to complete their qualifications and if we can get them back before the end of the academic year they still stand a good chance if we focus more on this. However, the support that they need before they can start their studies again could prevent this. In addition, for year 11s who will miss their last terms with us they may not return to school at all which is a worry.

Financial Implications.

We are commissioned by schools on a place by place basis. Although schools are continuing to get full pay for teachers and their normal funding, plus additional funding from the Government, our future is far less secure. Some schools and LAs have asked for work to be deferred until learners return and others are not giving us any certainty at all. This is an area of concern for us.

I believe that we are a Quality Accredited Alternative provision who have worked some counties for 14 years with schools and directly with the LA. We have furloughed most of our team where we can but we have fixed costs that we cannot reduce and we have a skilled workforce that we do not want to lose. These employees work with children with the most challenging behaviours who cannot attend mainstream schools. It is disappointing that there is not more being done to support companies like ours.

We are not a charity and therefore don't qualify for much of the government funding. My business partner and myself are Directors who derive our income as Directors through Dividends. We do not earn huge salaries (not as much as Headteachers) but cannot claim anything. If we cannot support ourselves then the business will close and 15 people will lose their jobs.

I believe if organisations like ours do not get support and fold, then everyone will be worse off as a result. Many schools rely on places like us to support the most vulnerable and there will be more of these and not less in the short term. We are best equipped to offer the therapeutic support that traumatised young people will require when lockdown eases. Schools are not equipped to deal with this.

We are putting ourselves at risk as key workers to ensure we can stay open and provide support and we do so because we are passionate about our students, but there are no guarantees of any financial support or security and I imagine many other training and education providers feel the same.

We have arranged for some of our learners to do a residential trip this summer and are funding some of it ourselves. However, they were doing some of the fundraising as part of their development. We simply do not have the money to run it if it comes down to a choice between paying wages or funding an external event for our learners. I feel extremely sad about this since this could be a life changing event for them.

The impact on our company on our team and on our learners of CV19 has been quite dramatic.

Impact on Disadvantaged Groups

- Missing out on the support that for many is a lifeline to remaining safe
- Potential for many to come to additional harm - neglect, abuse, grooming etc
- The longer they are away from education the less likely they will return
- Increased likelihood of high risk activities
- For those who are struggling with anxiety based issues more self harm, more disassociation from the outside world and generally becoming harder to reach
- Loss of education or preparation for next steps in life
- More chance of becoming NEET eventually.
- Harder to trace whereabouts
- Will find the transition back into any form of education harder than most
- No reliable support network to guide them through this period
- Lack of continuous and sustained support from agencies around them
- Lack of frontline services to reach out to them
- Many are from families where access to any form of home educating is possible or available.
- No clear coherent plan to support these children when they return at present
- Lots of funding being issued but seeming haphazard distribution and also organisations like ours are not included in that distribution although we are skilled at working with this demographic and are still working to support them.

Contingency Planning

I believe that there are lots of lessons that can be learned here.

When trying to support the most vulnerable then support should be given to organisations that are skilled and have previously demonstrated ability to support them. Where they are accessing at that time.

Funding only goes to charities and help lines and most vulnerable children do not call helplines.

Alternative education providers as well as schools and charities should be included in strategy meetings to build contingency plans.

There should be a Quality Assurance scheme that organisations can become accredited to to ensure quality of provision for frontline services no matter what kind of organisation they are.

Access to vulnerable learners should be instant and the lines of communication are too long and protracted. Timing is key.

Quality and consistency of communication is important throughout. There seems to be an abundance of information circulating but other than government comms it is hard to know what or who to believe.

Focus on providers at the front line is important as is their input, but their future security is also important as they are part of the solution towards protecting and connecting with very vulnerable children in the future. If they do not survive this then the problem for schools and children at risk become greater.

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