

Written evidence submitted by Phoenix Education Consultancy Ltd

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Phoenix Education Consultancy is a national organisation which aims to support children at risk of being marginalised. The director, Sarah Dove, has over 19 years' experience of working with children that are disadvantaged and/or marginalised. This may be through poverty, special educational needs, exclusion or medical needs. Before and during the pandemic the consultancy worked with a number of organisations. Such as London Borough of Redbridge, Birmingham City Council, and Skylark Partnerships as the project manager for one of the Department of Education's Alternative Provision Innovation Fund project. A key part of my work was voluntary during this period of time including engagement on social media channels such as twitter promoting #KidsCovidMH which was a platform for parents and professionals to share their experiences and solutions to support children during this difficult time. I also implemented a survey to children to complete called 'Thinking About School' which was completed by other 2000 children who wanted their views and experiences to be heard. I was a member of the DfE AP stakeholder group representing the national organisation PRUsAP.

In responding to the Education Committee's request for evidence I have focused on the terms of reference, areas which are relevant to the scope of the inquiry and my field of expertise relating to the services I provide, or as one of my most important roles, as a mother.

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

This was varied. There seemed to be different interpretations of guidance and potential solutions. Whilst some areas completely stopped face-to-face CAMHS appointments for examples, others were more readily able to use IT solutions to maintain continuity of support for children. Some organisations did distance mentoring/engagement sessions whilst others maintained limited or no contact. I was most concerned about children that would be considered 'below' threshold. Those children that maybe did not meet a Child in Need plan but by virtue of restrictions of a pandemic may have greater need.

2. Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

Again this was varied, some schools produced a range of documents and resources and had on-going dialogue with children. The survey 'Thinking about school' indicated that some children did not have any contact with school whatsoever, whilst simultaneously indicating that one of their biggest support to help a return to school was the relationships with teachers. These were few and far between but certainly did have an effect on individual children. Other families complained about too much contact and an assumption that because they had an Education Health Care Plan it meant they were additional vulnerable in

some ways and were telephoned continually. It would have made more sense if there was a central coordination to these phone calls to improve engagement and target resources effectively. I believe this was done particularly well in the London Borough of Redbridge where the Local Authority coordinated support with regular meetings with stakeholders.

Some parents complained about a lack of IT resources which made it difficult to access remote learning. Whilst they may have had 1 or 2 computers at home, if they have 2 children and worked full-time from home it became difficult to be able to coordinate who would use which resources. Moreover, many children experienced lack of facilities in terms of a quiet space to be able to complete work. The National Oak Academy was cited by some as being a helpful resource to allow access for some children. This should be further extended with further activities and tasks and designed for children who may struggle in mainstream education for whatever reason. Most children who responded to the survey reported that they were given work by their schools which they either completed with parents support or independently. There were very few children who replied to the survey who did not do any school work at all.

Some children reported improved mental health as they did not have the emotional challenge of attending school. For some children being at home felt like a sanctuary. Other children that were more involved in gang activity and exploitation had some space from those that exploited to them, thereby improving their safety. Other children, may have had more difficulty relating to self-harming behaviours without the structures and routines of school. Again a key adjective of this submission is that the children's experiences were varied in either response to the survey or in the work that I undertook nationally.

3. 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)

One theme which continued throughout the Covid-19 crisis was that children with special needs and medical needs already have many years of poor experiences of education. Reports of children being out of school for many years because they were traumatised, a lack of resources to manage eye gaze technology and a lack of commitment to national policy such as the Medical Conditions in School policy meant that being out of school was not a new thing. My hope is that Covid-19 will bring about an understanding of how exclusion from schooling has a fundamental impact on a child's well being as well as their parent/carers ability to sustain continued employment.

4. What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

I believe we should plan for the children that are already living the realities of non-attendance to school. Their understanding about what would work for them will help us plan for future national emergencies. We need to build capacity in resources in meaningful online learning platforms, use of telepresence solutions and transition support for our vulnerable children. We also need to think carefully about a recovery or re-engagement curriculum to

help the children that have been out of school return in a way that not only brings success but maintains and builds upon their emotional well-being.

For more information from Phoenix Education Consultancy in relation to Covid-19 please see www.phoenixeducationconsultancy.com/back-to-school

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