

Written evidence submitted by St Christopher's Fellowship

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

About St Christopher's Fellowship

St Christopher's Fellowship is a charity looking after children and young people in care, on the edge of care and leaving care. We provide children's homes, semi-independent accommodation, fostering and outreach services (including educational support, therapeutic support and preventative work) across England and the Isle of Man.

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

We welcome the inclusion of people working in children's homes and semi-independent services as critical workers. The practical impact of enabling children's home staff to purchase food for the children and to use public transport more safely, especially in the first weeks of food shortages and high anxiety, made a huge difference to our ability to provide for children's basic needs.

However, delivery of these measures did not feel timely. Each day with shortages of food and cleaning products made caring for the children very difficult and raised anxiety for the people looking after them. For example, there was a delay between announcing support and confirmation of which roles would be classed as keyworkers.

There was little clarity on what proof was required to demonstrate that people were critical workers (e.g. a letter from your employer or your ID card). There is no uniformity in what schools require, making it difficult as an employer to ascertain how to provide the right evidence. These may seem to be small inconveniences, but at a time when we were contending with heightened anxiety and risk, each point where we needed to spend time clarifying what steps we should take was a significant inconvenience. The system worked more smoothly in the Isle of Man, where the government provided a letter to all critical workers that could be used to access special shopping hours for personal use and for shopping for children's residential services.

Few of our staff accessed school places for their children. This was for a mixture of reasons, including the limited hours schools were offering and the messages from some schools which seemed to aim to deter key workers from sending their children

to school. Some schools highlighted that staff would not be first-aid trained and that children would be “babysat” rather than taught lessons. What was a good solution of supporting keyworkers’ children to remain in education did not work in the execution.

The offer of testing staff was important in assisting us to make contingency plans and care for children. However, the delivery has been slow and ineffective. We are now in week nine of lockdown and have so far only been able to test one member of staff even though more have requested it; this is due to supply and demand issues. It has taken two weeks to get log-in details for the system. The initial testing that was offered, but not delivered, necessitated staff driving to a testing center; this is impractical given that the vast majority of our keyworkers living in London do not have cars. We are also concerned that testing has been limited to symptomatic staff, when it is understood that there can be many instances where an individual has is asymptomatic and therefore unaware that they have coronavirus. This has run the risk that staff may spread the virus to colleagues and children without realising.

Recognition of children’s home staff as keyworkers has been valuable and we would request that this recognition is formally continued post-crisis. This would improve their status amongst other professionals and draw more people to the sector.

Extra funding has been provided to local authorities in recognition that there are additional costs to supporting vulnerable people through this period. The process by which providers or foster carers can access this funding to meet the extra costs they are incurring has not been clear and differs between local authorities. This has made it challenging to apply for.

The capacity of children’s services to support vulnerable children and young people

Some local authorities have prioritised children in need over looked after children, which has been felt by children in our care.

In the early stages, local authorities responded in a “kneejerk” way. We experienced a number of instances where social workers had sent letters to young people informing them that all of their contact sessions (with family, social workers, support workers and other visitors) were to be cancelled. At other times communication from local authorities to providers like St Christopher’s has not been clear about contact from social workers or personal advisors. This has upset and unsettled many young people, leaving them without answers as to when they could see people again and not offering alternative ways of staying in touch. It would have been less disruptive for local authorities to take stock and reflect on the impact this would have on young

people before making any decisions. This is particularly pertinent for young people in semi-independent homes, who may be more reliant on these relationships.

It then felt as though social workers were individually deciding what contact to maintain with young people as there was no initial statement from each local authority about the level of service that providers and young people could expect. Since then some local authorities have introduced weekly bulletins so that we can stay informed, which we have found very useful. Social workers are also making the effort to contact young people and make better use of systems like Mind Of My Own. In our Isle of Man services, social workers have maintained regularly contact with services and young people through at least one weekly phone call. We would like to see this model replicated in the UK.

At times we have needed PPE but it has been challenging and time-consuming to obtain. In the first weeks of lockdown staff were incredibly anxious about the potential risk to themselves, their families and the children they care for. Many staff would have been reassured by access to gloves and cleaning products. Some local authorities have provided us with PPE but again there is a lack of national system, so we have wasted time trying to locate resources and navigate processes.

Many local authorities have been unforthcoming about their contingency planning for the outbreak. Local authorities have not seen it as their responsibility to support providers, such as when there were concerns about having enough healthy or symptom-free staff to run homes safely. We have not felt supported by local authorities, but feel rather that they have put extra demands on providers without providing solutions. This has been in contrast to our experience on the Isle of Man where the government arranged for social workers to train to be able to work in our residential homes if staffing numbers meant this was necessary.

We have needed to provide additional support for young people's mental health and for their education, which we feel was not always adequately resourced by local authorities.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

We have seen examples where the lack of formal schooling has reduced children's anxiety and enabled relationships between children and their caregivers to flourish. However we are concerned that many looked after children, especially those who had gaps in their education, will struggle to return to education and will need extra input.

The school offer for looked after children has been quite variable, with schools babysitting children rather than teaching. This is likely to further widen the attainment gap for looked after children.

Young people face the risk of being awarded their predicted grade when they may be able to perform better in the exam. Looked after children are likely to be hit harder by this as many have missed chunks of education or have not regularly attended school.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- **The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**
- **Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**
- **The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses**

We have young people enrolled at schools, colleges and pupil referral units (PRUs). There has been a mixture of support on offer. Some of the positive measures include reduced timetables and the educational provision communicating directly with both our children's homes and the young people themselves. Some of the less helpful examples include one school who invited a young person in to collect a packed lunch, but nothing else was offered.

Young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) have struggled with being asked to attend school despite the closures. Firstly this request did not account for young people feeling anxious about the risk of the virus. To mitigate this we provided taxis to take young people to and from school, as the government advised against using public transport. Secondly, asking this group of young people to attend school stigmatises them further as it marks them as different from their peers. We feel there is greater value in allowing them to take part in learning at home rather than highlighting their difference, particularly when the learning on offer could be achieved at home. It is also difficult to encourage them to attend school when their friends do not have to as they feel it is really unfair, particularly as they are not on an EHCP due to any choice of their own.

Some young people who have no school place (sometimes due to having moved to a new area or awaiting a place from the local authority) have been unable to progress during this time. Our teams have been proactive in identifying short-term employment skills courses but staffing on these programmes has been impacted by sickness. We have asked virtual schools for tuition but also seek other solutions.

Generally our foster carers have had positive experiences with schools, who have been supportive in providing information to young people and organising laptops, equipment and resources if required.

When we asked young people about how the government's decisions around education and exams impacted them, they generally felt that they are more disadvantaged than their peers who live in a family home. The quotes below are directly from young people:

1. Challenges of finding a quiet space to study

- “It is so hard to be respectful of each other. Some people have their music on and it's their home. But my bedroom is right next door and I am trying to video call my tutor group. Even if it is on quietly it is more than if you were at college it is still distracting.”
- “I can't work in the communal space because there is no communal space.”
- “If I bring my stuff to the kitchen to do work because it is the only communal space with a table, I just get interrupted by people making a cup of tea or chatting. I get really angry and then they get annoyed with me and then I skip a lesson or give up on working for the day because I am in a bad mood.”
- “I don't have a desk and yeah I can get one but it will take so long, it is almost not worth it.”
- “People are always telling me to go out and how it is not good to be in your room all day. I am literally in my room all day. It is not good to study and sleep and eat in the same place.”

2. Having to motivate yourself

- “It is so hard to be at home and see other people not having to study and decide to study.”
- “There is quite a lot of nice stuff going on in the home so it feels a shame to miss out on that because I have to study. I want to be in the garden like the other young people. When you go to college you can't feel like you are missing out because you don't know what is going on.”
- “College only works for me because there is a lot going on. At home it is just me and my computer. I can't get into it.”
- “I am not going to lie. I just mute them and turn the camera off.”
- “You can just ring your tutor and explain you have done the work and then just not do anything. At least if you are at college you turn up for a class because you are already there.”

3. Vocational courses

- “I don’t have enough to do.”
- “They tell you to get all the theory done and I have but now I don’t have anything to do.”
- “I needed the practical parts to help motivate me with the theory. Without it, it makes you want to quit.”
- “I need a phone to video my practical elements but can’t afford one.”

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

At St Christopher’s we have reallocated funds to try and cover additionally incurred costs caused by the coronavirus outbreak. We are facing a loss of income from pausing some of our business development work, but have used the money we would have invested in these projects to pay for staff sickness and agency staff to cover shifts.

Although we are still receiving referrals to our services, it has been difficult to get in touch with social workers to collect information required to confirm a placement. We have capacity to care for more children and understand that there are high numbers of children who need placements at this time, but processes to support this need are not working. This has also resulted in loss of income.

The number of tendering opportunities available has slowed down, which impacts our income as we rely on these cycles for contracts.

Due to young people being in the house permanently and feeling frustrated, we have seen an increase in damage to the homes and furniture. These costs are ongoing.

Foster carers are covering increased costs on craft materials, creative activities and printing so that they can keep young people engaged and prevent them from using screens all the time. They are also seeing increased spending on food, which is not excessive but does impact family budgets.

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)

Young people who would receive pastoral and counselling in school are missing out. Young people build relationships with these workers, so it is not easy to replicate and replace this level of support.

Homeschooling is resulting in a lack of structure and routine for some young people. Some parents may be less equipped with the skills or may find it convenient to allow their children to skip schoolwork. Our outreach teams provide guidance and support to these parents but it is difficult to have a coordinated and consistent approach from the professional network whilst everyone is working remotely.

IT equipment for home schooling is vital, but not always available. We have one case where the parent has been asking for a laptop so their children could complete schoolwork, but there seems to be confusion over which agency should be providing this. We cannot be sure if this is down to financial resources, lack of communication between agencies, or both.

Online resources for home schooling are widely available but are utilised differently from school to school. Some allow let pupils work at their own pace, but this can result in young people becoming complacent on their volume of work. Other schools are stricter and put more pressure on parents, who may also be home working or not adequately equipped to support with education.

Some care leavers have shared that they have not felt much difference to their usual lives during lockdown. Often they do not have the money or networks to socialise regularly as they struggle financially, do not have family or are estranged, and do not have a large network of friends. This highlights the social isolation that many young care leavers experience at all times, not just during lockdown.

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

Many of the measures introduced by the government have been helpful and welcomed. However they were slow to arrive, with announcements made prior to any details being shared, meaning we have been unable to access some of the support that has been promoted. In future we would welcome a quicker response, with logistics planned before being announced. For example, the offer of laptops for care leavers was only made a few weeks into lockdown and will still take a long time to arrive.

A minimum portion of the additional funding for local authorities should be ring-fenced for children's services to ensure that young people can be safe, cared for and supported.

We think there could be a way for the Department for Education to communicate directly with providers, as it has felt a bit piecemeal at times. Perhaps this could be done through existing email lists that Ofsted use to communicate.

In the event of future panic buying, a pre-existing contingency plan for retailers would help to reassure services how to access basic essentials.

Finally, we would love to see the UK government speaking to young people directly and more frequently about the situation, as we have seen in other European countries. This is an anxiety-inducing time for many people and we know that our young people have lots of questions. Being recognised and communicated with from such a high level would help to reassure them and show that their feelings are valid and respected.

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