

Written evidence submitted by Action for Children

Education Committee inquiry

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

May 2020

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people through provision of practical and emotional care and support, and advocacy to bring lasting improvements to their lives. Last year, we worked with over 387,000 children and families, through over 475 services across the UK.

This submission draws on our experience of supporting children and young people during COVID-19; it is informed by the expertise and experiences of our frontline staff and the families that they support.

As well as continuing to deliver our services to families during 'lockdown', we are meeting their urgent financial needs through our Coronavirus Emergency Fund. We have so far spent over £300,500 on urgent essentials for over 5,300 children and young people. Our frontline staff have used the fund to distribute grants for food, utility bills, and essential items (such as clothing, cleaning products and nappies).

Summary

1. Children's services were already under pressure before COVID-19. The pandemic has occurred at a time when they have little resilience to manage its impact.
2. While many providers, including Action for Children, acted quickly to shift to remote delivery, there are significant gaps in the support available to children. There is particularly acute concern about identifying and supporting 'hidden' vulnerable children, for example those experiencing domestic abuse, who are not currently in contact with children's services professionals, at a time when their needs are likely to have increased.
3. It is feared that demand for support will spike when 'lockdown' measures are lifted, yet early years settings, schools and children's services are currently ill-equipped to respond, due to insufficient resource.
4. To enable children and families to recover from the impact of the pandemic, the Government must set out a comprehensive recovery plan. It should include ring-fenced funding for local authorities, charities, and education settings, to allow them to expand and adapt their services and support for families, to meet increased levels of need.
5. The Government must also urgently make available dedicated financial support for low-income families with children, to help them deal with the immediate effects of the pandemic on their household incomes. Furthermore, the Government should review the social security system to ensure that it can adequately support families to deal with the longer-term impact of the crisis.

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

- 1.1 COVID-19 has placed significant pressure on an already unstable children's services system.
- 1.2 Our recent analysis with Barnardo's, the Children's Society, NCB and NSPCCⁱ of children's services funding/spending rates across England provides insight into the perilous financial state of the system even before COVID-19. The analysis estimates that funding available to local authorities for children's services fell by nearly a quarter (23%) between 2010/11 and 2018/19; yet, local authorities' spending on children's services reduced by only 6% in that period, indicating the extent to which local authorities are plugging a funding gap. This is an unsustainable situation, particularly as local authorities' spending power for children's services will be threatened as business rates, council tax and other revenue streams are diminished by the economic impact of the pandemic.
- 1.3 Two other concerning trends are revealed in the analysis. Firstly, funding fell twice as fast in the areas of highest deprivation. Secondly, local authorities have responded to financial pressures by increasing spending on statutory 'late intervention' services (such as support for looked-after children), where there has been increased demand, while reducing spending on non-statutory 'early intervention' services.
- 1.4 Early intervention (such as children's centres and family support) can prevent children and families' emerging issues from escalating, but between 2010/11-2018/19, local authority spending on early intervention fell by nearly half (46%), while late intervention spending rose by nearly a third (29%).
- 1.5 This downward trend in early intervention spending is putting children's services under significant pressure, as low-level needs can escalate if they go unmet, meaning that more expensive, crisis interventions are often needed later down the line.
- 1.6 The impact of COVID-19 on children and families will unfortunately add further pressure to the system. Referrals to children's social care have dropped during lockdown (by as much as 50% in some areasⁱⁱ) because children are not in contact with the professionals and trusted adults who are well-placed to identify them, and ensure provision of support (such as teachers, NHS staff and youth workers). It is therefore expected that when lockdown measures are lifted and contact resumes, referrals are likely to rise quickly. As well as urgent access to statutory services for those at high risk, early intervention will be critical to supporting children with existing needs that have been compounded by lockdown, as well as those with new, emerging needs.
- 1.7 Organisations across the sector are currently planning their post-lockdown service offers, in preparation for a rise in demand. However, funding is needed for both local authorities and charities to deliver this support.
- 1.8 At Action for Children we are currently expanding and adapting a range of key services, so that we can provide ongoing support to vulnerable families, as well as engaging new ones. We aim to:
 - 1.8.1 Boost our family support provision, including that provided in our children's centres.

- 1.8.2 Rapidly scale-up our digital support offer for parents through www.parents.actionforchildren.org.uk, which provides advice and resources, and the opportunity to speak 1-2-1 with parenting coaches through our 'TALK' chat service. In the last two years, over 3,000 conversations have taken place on TALK. In response to COVID-19, we are increasing its capacity, and developing new online resources to meet emerging needs among parents.
- 1.8.3 Increase our mental health support for children, including the expansion of our school-based Blues programme into a digital offer. We also aim to expand school-based provision of the programme in the post-lockdown recovery period.
- 1.8.4 Expand the capacity of our services for children affected by domestic abuse. We aim to extend our Newcastle-based Breaking the Cycle programme to other areas; the programme provides counselling for children affected by domestic abuse aged 4-16.
- 1.8.5 Boost our recruitment of foster carers.
- 1.8.6 Increase the capacity of our residential children's homes. We currently have 22 residential services, and plan to establish more, including the purchase of new homes.
- 1.9 However, this planning is happening in the context of declining organisational income as a result of COVID-19; public donations and revenue from services are falling.
- 1.10 **Recommendation: The Government should develop a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan for vulnerable children** that includes ring-fenced funding for local authorities and charities to commission and deliver key services, including early intervention, to families when lockdown measures are lifted. Funding should be allocated based on the likely level of need in an area, to ensure that local authorities, charities, and schools are adequately resourced to provide the necessary support.
- 1.11 **Recommendation: The Government's upcoming Spending Review/Round should begin the process of rebuilding children's services.** After the pandemic, many local authorities will no longer be able to rely on the reserves they previously used to cover their children's services funding/spending gaps. Long-term investment is needed to stabilise the system and enable local authorities to rebalance spending towards high-quality preventative services and early intervention.

2. The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to: children's early development; the early years funded entitlement and the childcare market

Children's early development:

- 2.1 We deliver a range of early years services across the country, including 67 children's centres (England) and 48 nurseries (UK).
- 2.2 While the extent of the pandemic's impact on young children's development is not yet known, our service staff are concerned that closures are already detrimentally affecting many children's progress, due to the associated loss of routine, social interaction, and opportunities for stimulating play and educational activities.

- Furthermore, closures are likely to compound the early years attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peersⁱⁱⁱ, due to differences in the quality of their home learning environments during lockdown^{iv}.
- 2.3 Our frontline service staff are concerned that many disadvantaged families do not have access to the resources necessary for effective home education, such as toys and books. They are currently among the items most commonly requested through our Coronavirus Emergency Fund. While we, and many other children's charities, are supporting families in those circumstances (through, for example, distribution of activity packs and delivery of online play sessions), there are many who are not in contact with early years professionals during lockdown.
 - 2.4 When lockdown measures are lifted, additional support will be needed for those whose development has stalled or regressed. Particular attention should be paid to: children due to enter reception later this year, as it is a key transition point; and those who struggle to re-adapt to the environment - separation anxiety is likely in many cases, after children have spent a prolonged period of time in constant contact with their parents/carers (it could be particularly acute for those with a history of disrupted attachment, and those who had only recently started attending a setting when lockdown began).
 - 2.5 **Recommendation: The Government should ensure that early years settings are adequately resourced to support children returning after lockdown with gaps in their development, and wellbeing needs.** Furthermore, financial support is needed for parenting advice providers to expand and adapt their services to meet rising demand for information and resources to improve children's home learning environments and wellbeing. The role that those providers play in boosting parents'/carers' resilience to the effects of lockdown should be recognised.

The childcare market:

- 2.6 The pandemic will exacerbate the financial difficulties that many childcare providers already faced. A survey of over 3,000 providers conducted earlier this month found that a quarter predict they are likely to close within a year^v.
 - 2.7 Providers, including ourselves, are concerned about the likely financial impact of social distancing requirements when lockdown measures are lifted and settings reopen; the need to restrict the size of cohorts attending will mean reduced occupancy and, therefore, reduced funding.
 - 2.8 **Recommendation: The Government should clarify how it plans to ensure the financial viability of the early years sector.** The level of funding provided must reflect the scale of existing financial pressures faced by providers, and the compounding effect of the pandemic.
3. **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 the structure and oversight of in-person education; the effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses**

Consistency of messaging from schools on remote learning:

- 3.1 Schools' approaches to supporting pupils' educational development during lockdown has been highly variable. Our service staff report that some are very proactive in their communication with pupils and parents/carers, and the provision of resources; meanwhile, others effectively ceased contact when their school buildings closed.
- 3.2 While the full impact of closures is not yet known, pupils' academic attainment is likely to reflect those inconsistencies, both now and in the future, with significant disparities likely to emerge.
- 3.3 An unequal pace of development is also likely to be seen between pupils who have and have not had access to online educational resources. The pandemic has brought the 'digital divide' into stark relief, and the Department's digital device scheme, though welcome, is too restricted in terms of eligibility to have an impact on this issue at scale.
- 3.4 There is a clear socio-economic dimension to these issues. A recent survey^{vi} of parents conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies indicates that children's home learning environments during lockdown are affected by their household income. The survey of over 4,000 parents of 4 to 15-year-olds found: higher-income parents are much more likely than the less well-off to report that their child's school provides online classes and access to online videoconferencing with teachers; children from better-off families are spending 30% more time on home learning than those from poorer families; and better-off children have access to more resources for home learning. The research concludes that school closures will almost certainly increase educational inequalities.
- 3.5 **Recommendation: The Government should take steps to prevent the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers from widening as a result of the crisis.** The Department should encourage schools to develop re-entry programmes that identify those returning to school with gaps in their educational development. Particular attention should be paid to the academic progress of children from low-income families.

Children and young people's mental health outside the structure and oversight of in-person education:

- 3.6 Prior to COVID-19, prevalence of mental health problems among children and young people across the country was rising. Our service staff are now reporting increasing indications of mental health issues due to the pandemic, particularly related to anxiety. There are concerns that the crisis is compounding existing mental health issues, as well as triggering new problems for those without pre-existing mental health conditions. Staff have also seen an increase in the number of parents/carers requesting advice to support their children's mental health and wellbeing.
- 3.7 We are concerned about rising unmet need, both in terms of children with needs who have not yet been identified due social distancing measures, and those with identified needs who are currently unable to access support. Furthermore, digital

- exclusion is a particular concern, as many mental health support services have moved online, with lots of children unable to access it.
- 3.8 **Recommendation: The Government’s recovery plan for children should include ring-fenced funding to boost the capacity of children’s mental health support to meet the anticipated spike in demand**, through both digital and in-person delivery. As an increasing number of mental health support services move to digital delivery, it is important that some in-person support is retained (with social distancing rules observed) for children who are digitally excluded, and for those for whom digital delivery is not appropriate or effective.
- 3.9 **Recommendation: Schools’ re-entry programmes should focus on wellbeing outcomes as well as academic attainment**, so that mental support is offered alongside educational support. Schools should identify pupils returning to school with mental health needs, in the same way that they would identify those who have fallen behind academically. Particular attention should be paid to looked-after children who have not taken up their school places during lockdown. Our fostering service staff are concerned that many may struggle to readapt to the school environment, as even in usual circumstances they can find integration challenging. After a prolonged period away from school, and in constant contact with their carers, many may be reluctant to return.

Children and young people’s safety outside the structure and oversight of in-person education:

- 3.10 There is significant concern across the sector about ‘hidden’ vulnerable children who are not attending school. Non-attendance interrupts the usual safeguarding mechanisms that can protect children from harm in their home and wider community. Low attendance rates of vulnerable children are therefore concerning at a time when there is likely to be a rise in child protection and safeguarding incidents, due to the additional pressures families are facing. The Department estimates that only 14% of vulnerable children are currently attending school^{vii}.
- 3.11 **Recommendation: The Department should encourage local authorities to establish multi-agency review panels as a means of identifying and supporting vulnerable children, and encouraging their school attendance.** The panels should systematically review individual cases of children subject to Child Protection Plans, and with Child in Need status, and identify how best to support them at this time.
- 3.12 **Recommendation: An improved government response to the issue of ‘hidden’ vulnerable children should be prioritised in any work to prepare for another national emergency of this scale in the future.** The current response has left many children at increased risk of abuse and neglect, as they have been at home out of the sight of professionals and trusted adults. An improved government response should seek to ensure consistency of approach across the country, with all schools proactively identifying vulnerable children and promoting their school attendance/working with local authority partners to ensure they are supported.
- 3.13 We are also very concerned about the safety and wellbeing of ‘hidden’ 0-2s, an issue that has been given insufficient attention in wider discussions on supporting vulnerable children during lockdown. Nursery closures and reductions in health

visiting services will mean that contact with early years professionals will be much-diminished, or non-existent, at this time.

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

Financial implications of closures for pupils and families:

- 4.1 Closures of schools and early years settings have had negative financial implications for many low-income families with children. Most children and young people are now at home full-time; the majority are not eligible for a school place, and of those who are (children of keyworkers and vulnerable children), many are not attending. Families are therefore seeing their daily household costs rising (stemming from, for example, higher food and utility bills, and the costs associated with accessing educational resources and leisure activities).
- 4.2 This increase in household expenditure coincides for many families with a decrease in their household income as a result of the pandemic (due to, for example, furlough, a pay cut, or redundancy). Furthermore, the pandemic has occurred at a time when low-income families were already financially exposed, after a long period of low wage growth, welfare benefits cuts (including the benefits freeze), and rising household costs (e.g. childcare, transport and food). Going into the crisis, 4.2 million children lived in poverty^{viii}, and the majority of children (63% - 8.6 million) lived in families with little (<£1500) or no savings to shield them from the impact of COVID-19 on their household finances^{ix}.
- 4.3 Our Coronavirus Emergency Fund provides up-to-date insight on the financial needs of many low-income families with children, and indicates the precariousness of their current situations. The latest breakdown of spend shows that 63% went towards essential items such as cleaning products, nappies and educational resources; 26% went towards food; 8% went towards utility bills; and 3% went towards clothing.
- 4.4 **Recommendation:** While previously-announced measures to support incomes are welcome, dedicated financial support for low-income families with children is urgently needed. **Child Benefit should be increased by £10 per week to ensure that families can afford daily essentials.** Child Benefit reaches many more families than Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit (which were recently increased). Given that so many more families with children are now, as a result of the pandemic, facing financial hardship, and that many of them will be just below the threshold for entitlement to means-tested benefits, increasing Child Benefit represents the best available option for supporting them, and for reducing child poverty rates.
- 4.5 **Recommendation:** **For the financial help available through welfare benefits to reach the children who need it most, the 'benefit cap' and 'two-child limit' must be suspended.** They prevent many of the lowest-income families (particularly lone-parent families, and families with more than two children) from accessing the financial support that they would otherwise have qualified for.

- 4.6 **Recommendation:** The Government should review the social security system to ensure that it can adequately support families to deal with the longer-term impact of the crisis.

5. 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)

The effect on disadvantaged groups/long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups:

Children affected by domestic abuse:

- 5.1 The crisis is placing many children and families at increased risk of domestic abuse. There has been a 25% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, with Refuge reporting a 700% rise in calls in a single day^x. Even before COVID-19, domestic abuse was the most common additional factor of need identified in children's social care assessments for children in need (identified in more than half - 51% - of relevant assessments in 2018/19). Furthermore, analysis by the Children's Commissioner shows that 831,000 children in England are living in households affected by domestic abuse.
- 5.2 Domestic abuse can have a devastating impact on children and young people. They can suffer from depression and suicidal tendencies, and can struggle to form healthy adult relationships^{xi}.
- 5.3 Despite concerns about increasing levels of need among children, 60% of service providers that responded to Women's Aid COVID-19 survey stated that they needed to reduce/cancel their service offer for children. Even before the crisis, support for children affected by domestic abuse was patchy; our research^{xii} found that they faced barriers to support in two-thirds of local authorities interviewed. The current crisis has exacerbated existing problems.
- 5.4 **Recommendation:** The Government must ensure that support for child victims of domestic abuse is central to its COVID-19 response, and that their needs are considered when allocating additional funding to victim support services.
- 5.5 **Recommendation:** The Government must act upon the knowledge that the pandemic has further increased the need for provisions set out in the Domestic Abuse Bill, particularly for children. The proposed statutory duty on local authorities must be extended to community-based services, and the current definition of domestic abuse should be amended to recognise that children and young people experience abuse too.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND):

- 5.6 We are particularly concerned about children with SEND who are not currently attending school. Staff working in some of our 78 (UK) services for disabled children are concerned by signs that lockdown is adversely affecting the children that they support. Staff in our short breaks residential home in Northumberland, where the local special school has closed, are seeing the impact of children now being at home full-time, without access to the everyday support and structure that

school provides. Parents/carers are understandably struggling to cope with their new 24/7 caring and teaching responsibilities; staff have noticed a regression in the skills and behaviour of many children.

- 5.7 **Recommendation: The Government's recovery plan for children must include funding for the expansion of specialist services that support the most vulnerable groups**, such as children affected by domestic abuse, children with SEND, and looked-after children, to help them to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

The Department's approach to free school meals (FSM):

- 5.8 Schools' approaches to the provision of FSMs have varied significantly across the country, with some providing daily meals directly to pupils, and others shut and providing no food at all. This has meant that many families are reliant on the FSM voucher scheme, which allows them to purchase a supermarket e-gift card for groceries. However, the scheme's operation has been problematic. The vouchers are not reaching all those who need them, and the process for acquiring them is often slow and burdensome for families.
- 5.9 A key problem lies in the school-led delivery mechanism. Many families have children at different schools, meaning that they have multiple sets of voucher codes and e-gift cards. Furthermore, some schools apply for e-gift cards for the supermarket closest to the school, rather than closest to the family; this can require families to travel between multiple supermarkets, and for some they are out of walking distance at a time of significantly reduced access to public transport.
- 5.10 **Recommendation: The Government should review the operation of the FSM voucher scheme and consider moving it to a national or local authority-led delivery mechanism, to improve efficiency and consistency.** The review should also consider extending the scheme to apply to all school holidays during the crisis, in recognition of the pandemic's impact on many low-income families. Furthermore, contingency planning is needed to ensure that an improved scheme is ready for deployment, should another national crisis of this scale occur - the review should inform its development.

For further information please contact Sam Reeve, Campaigns & Public Affairs Manager

ⁱ Action for Children, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, The Children's Society, Barnardo's (May 2020), *Children and Young People's Services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19*. Available online at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/13023/childrens-and-young-peoples-services-funding-and-spending-report-2018-19-002.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Local Government Chronicle (April 2020), *ADCS President: Children's social care referrals down by up to half*. Available online at: <https://www.lgcplus.com/services/children/adcs-president-childrens-social-care-referrals-down-by-up-to-half-23-04-2020/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Department for Education (2019), *Early years foundation stage profile results: 2018 to 2019*. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2018-to-2019#history>

^{iv} Institute for Fiscal Studies (May 2020), *Learning during lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. Available online at: https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848?utm_source=Children+England+Email+News&utm_campaign=19f1

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^v Early Years Alliance (May 2020), *A quarter of childcare providers fear closure within a year*. Available online at: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2020/05/quarter-childcare-providers-fear-closure-within-year>

^{vi} Institute for Fiscal Studies (May 2020), *Learning during lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. Available online at:

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^{vii} Department for Education (May 2020), *Attendance in education and early years settings in England – summary of returns to 15 May 2020*. Available online at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886118/COVID19_attendance_in_education_settings_data.pdf

^{viii} Department for Work and Pensions (March 2020), *Households below average income: 1994/95-2018/19*.

Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201819>

^{ix} Action for Children (April 2020), *Analysis of the Family Resources Survey (2015/16-2017/18)*. Available on request

^x The Observer (April 2020), *Revealed: surge in domestic violence during Covid-19*. Available online at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/domestic-violence-surges-seven-hundred-per-cent-uk-coronavirus>

^{xi} UNICEF (2006), *Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children*. Available online at:

<https://www.unicef.org/media/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf>

^{xii} Action for Children (2019), *Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse*. Available online at:

<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/12382/patchy-piecemeal-and-precarious-support-for-children-affected-by-domestic-abuse.pdf>

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