Written evidence submitted by UNICEF

UNICEF UK SUBMISSION

EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

UNICEF UK

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, is mandated by the UN General Assembly to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and promote the rights and wellbeing of every child. Together with partners, UNICEF works in over 190 countries and territories focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere. UNICEF has a specific role in providing advice and assistance to governments around the world in matters relating to children's rights.

Unicef UK is one of 36 National Committees raising funds for UNICEF's emergency and development work around the world and advocating for lasting change for children worldwide. Here in the UK, we work with two million children through our work with local authorities, hospitals and the nearly 5,000 schools in our Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) network.

Unicef UK is submitting evidence to the Education Select Committee with the aim of ensuring that the UK Government realises and protects children's rights throughout the Coronavirus pandemic and response. Where possible, our submission draws on direct consultation with children, young people, educators and parents, including through surveys with RRSA teachers and discussion with members of our Youth Advisory Board.[1]

1.   SUMMARY

1.1   The Coronavirus pandemic is an unparalleled crisis – one where we risk children being the hidden victims. Social distancing measures, school lockdowns, and the closure of public spaces, while critical for the health and safety of all, are challenging the realisation of children's rights in the UK.

1.2   While we recognise the Department for Education's (DfE) ongoing commitment to learning and support for the most vulnerable children, we have heard from children, parents, and teachers that significant challenges remain.

1.3   Unicef UK (UUK) is calling on the Government, and in particular the DfE, to prioritise understanding and addressing the concerns and needs of teachers, parents, and children, particularly in relation to mental health, learning loss, and digital connectivity.

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[1] Unicef UK's Youth Advisory Board consists of eight young people from across the UK aged 15-19. For more details, please visit https://www.unicef.org.uk/working-with-young-people/youth-voice/.

2. THE EFFECT OF CANCELLING FORMAL EXAMS, INCLUDING THE FAIRNESS OF QUALIFICATIONS AWARDED AND PUPILS' PROGRESSION TO THE NEXT STAGE OF EDUCATION OR EMPLOYMENT

2.1   Over 950,000 secondary level pupils will not sit external exams as expected this summer.[2] The cancellation of formal exams in 2020 was, and remains, a source of significant anxiety for young people. Discussion with members of Unicef UK's Youth Advisory Board (YAB) reveals concerns about fairness, future prospects, and process. Preparing for exams is also a concern for teachers, with 55% of secondary school respondents in UUK's teachers' survey reporting that supporting pupils with upcoming exams is one of their top five priorities.[3]

2.2   While we agree that the cancellation of exams was a necessary decision to ensure the safety of students and fairness of results, we remain concerned that the process was not determined with the views of young people involved (as is their right under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC). Though Ofqual expressed that the body had 'sought views from groups that represent students', we do not feel this sufficiently engaged young people in the process. We have no doubt that teachers and centre leaders will act in the best interests of children but note that this is not sufficient to ensure that all children and young people affected by the exceptional arrangements have been considered. Necessarily, the educators consulted will only have the expertise to act on behalf of their own pupils.

2.3   Perhaps as a result of this, discussion with our YAB members illustrates that students have extensive unanswered questions on the process and impact of the exceptional arrangements. In particular, we hear ongoing concern of the impact the exceptional arrangements could have on the perceived achievement of pupils in the summer 2020 assessment cohort.

2.4   **RECOMMENDATION: In order to address the concerns and questions of young people in relation to the 2020 exams, we encourage the DfE to work with Ofqual to arrange an open forum for young people to ask their questions.**

2.5   Anecdotal evidence suggests that some universities are not clearly stating to candidates that they will be flexible in admission decisions (as Ofqual confirmed the body asked universities to do in the 'Guidance for teachers, students, parents and carers').

2.6   **RECOMMENDATION: We ask the DfE, and in particular the Minister of State for Universities, to work with partners to reiterate the call to universities to be flexible in admissions in more formal terms.**

2.7   Given the significant impact the exceptional arrangements for the 2020 exams will have on young people, we encourage the DfE to work with Ofqual to undertake a child rights impact assessment (CRIA). The CRIA would explore the impact of the exceptional arrangements on children's rights, including UNCRC Articles 2 on non-discrimination, 3 on best interests, 12 on the right to be heard, and 28 on the right to education. This process would allow the Government to confidently assert that they have considered the unique impacts of the exceptional arrangements on children and

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[2] Estimate based on pupil numbers in Years 11 and 13 (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and numbers entering Scottish SQA exams for 2018.
[3] Unicef UK conducted a poll of more than 1500 individual school staff across the four nations of the UK. Among other questions, teachers were asked to select up to five top priorities from a set list.

young people and define actions needed to ensure the realisation of children's rights in this process.

2.8 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with partners to undertake a CRIA on the impact of the cancellation of 2020 examinations.**

2.9 We welcome the Government's recognition of the need to afford students who do not feel their grades accurately reflect their abilities with the opportunity to sit an examination. However, given that it is reasonable to assume that more pupils in this year's cohort will make use of this opportunity, we ask that the Government encourages Ofqual to consider if the announcement of results could be made earlier than in other years. We note that the current announcements are in August, leaving little time for pupils to prepare in the case of needing to resit the exams. This is critical given the extended period of time in which children have been out of school and the delayed articulation of this year's examinations process, which has likely caused a significant gap in preparation. If possible, results should be released in July to afford ample time for revision ahead of autumn exams.

2.10 **RECOMMENDATION: We encourage the DfE to work with Ofqual to release exam results as soon as possible, and ideally no later than 1 August.**

2.11 We also note that the cancellation of this year's examinations leaves pupils with future examinations in a difficult position. In particular, students who will not take GCSEs this year will not have had any formal examination experience when they sit their A-levels, which could leave them at a disadvantage.

2.12 **RECOMMENDATION: We recommend the DfE work with partners to deliver an optional, unmarked UK-wide mock examination, making the 2020 examination papers available and arranging a mark scheme to prepare pupils.**

2.13 **RECOMMENDATION: We recommend the DfE work with Ofqual, parents, teachers, and children, to develop reasonable adjustments for relevant future exam cohorts, in particular the 2019/2020 students in years 10 and 12. This should be developed as soon as possible to allow ample time for consultation, preparation, and implementation.**

2.14 We also highlight that there could be stigma attached to the 2020 exam cohort that could impact young people in future. There needs to be a focus on trusting the system that was implemented so that this cohort of young people is not disadvantaged. We encourage the DfE to consider how to implement more formal arrangements to avoid problems in future.

2.15 **RECOMMENDATION: We recommend the DfE works with partners, including in the private sector and universities, to implement formal arrangements to avoid stigmatisation of the 2020 exam cohort.**

2.16 Finally, we note that the pupils taking examinations in spring 2021 (students in this year's Year 10 and Year 12 cohort) will have missed up to four months of education. Even if they have been learning, what they have been taught, in what format, and with what support will vary significantly, both between pupils and between schools. In light of this, it is highly unlikely that a return to pre-2020 examination procedures for 2021 will produce a fair result for all pupils at GCSE and A-Level. This should be considered by the DfE at the earliest possible time, and ideally before the end of the 2020 summer term.

2.17 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with Ofqual, teachers, parents, and pupils to understand the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the 2021 examination cohort and take action as soon as possible, ideally no later than July 2020, to set out how it will mitigate disadvantage and learning loss caused by school closures this academic year.**

3 SUPPORT FOR PUPILS AND FAMILIES DURING CLOSURES

3.1 THE CONSISTENCY OF MESSAGING FROM SCHOOLS AND FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS ON REMOTE LEARNING

3.1.1 We recognise the DfE's work to provide guidance and support during an exceptionally fast moving and challenging time. However, we have heard anecdotally that a lack of clarity and some delays in providing guidance has led to some schools working in an ad hoc manner. Some improvements were made following the Easter break, but the picture remains very uneven across the country both in terms of academic support and pastoral care. For example, in some schools attendance by vulnerable children was proactively encouraged, while others very clearly shared the message that it was only if there were no other options for the family.

3.1.2 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should provide clearer guidance for schools, with a set of minimum expectations and examples of good practice. This should relate both to continuing home education and online learning and for the process of reopening schools.**

3.2 CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY OUTSIDE OF THE STRUCTURE AND OVERSIGHT OF IN-PERSON EDUCATION

3.2.1 Negative repercussions on the mental health and wellbeing of children is an important secondary impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, one that has not yet received the attention it requires. Over 350,000 young people accessed NHS Mental Health Services in England alone in 2018–19[4] and 110,000 14-year olds self-harm over the course of a year in the UK.[5] Furthermore, 160,000 children in England are living in households with domestic abuse.[6] These challenges are only likely to increase as a result of the unique pressures and impact of lockdown. Anecdotal evidence from a survey of frontline workers suggests that 'the pressures on young carers and how they will be encouraged to return to school and the impact of increased use of digital technology' are impacting on children's mental health and well-being.[7]

3.2.2 The mental health of children and young people is a major concern of teachers in the UK. A recent poll by Unicef UK found that 81% of teachers identified mental health as a top priority upon the reopening of schools.[8] Teachers are also worried about supporting children who may have

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[4] 'Number of children and young people accessing NHS funded community mental health services in England, April 2018 to March 2019, Experimental Statistics', NHS, 18 July 2019, available at https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-services-monthly-statistics/number-of-children-and-young-people-accessing-nhs-funded-community-mental-health-services-in-england-april-2018-to-march-2019-experimental-statistics.

[5] 'Self-harm in children: Statistics and facts', The Children's Society, available at https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood-report/self-harm-in-children-statistics-facts.

[6] 'Children: the hidden victims of domestic abuse', Women's Aid, available at https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/hiddenvictims/.

[7] S. Compton, *Responding to COVID-19: issues affecting services for children and young people: Briefing Note 4: 21/5/20*, The Children's Society. Available at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/responding-to-covid-19-childrens-services-briefing-note-4-21-05-20.pdf.

[8] Unicef UK polling (see footnote 3).

suffered from trauma or abuse during school closures, with more than half (53%) reporting this as a top concern.[9]

3.2.3　While teachers noted concerns for the mental health of children upon returning to school, our survey suggests that they may not have the resources necessary to support these children. Only one in five respondents (20%) believed they had adequate mental health counselling services in place, and 21% had no mental health counselling available through the school at all. It is perhaps unsurprising then that when respondents were asked to state the one additional support they would want if money was provided for it, the most common response (32%) was additional mental and emotional support available within the school. One quarter of respondents (27%) cited additional staff capacity, particularly for learning, pastoral and mental health needs.

3.2.4　We also hear from children of the emotional and mental health toll of the crisis. In another Unicef UK poll conducted with First News, nearly two-thirds of children (62%) were worried about the impact of the Coronavirus on their lives, and 46% reported experiencing anxiety or worry. Furthermore, more than half (57%) of responding children said home-schooling was stressful.[10]

3.2.5　Teachers and children are not alone in expressing concerns about mental health. In a third survey commissioned by Unicef UK, more than half (57%) of parents reported their child experiencing some kind of mental health problem.[11] One in four (27%) of parents said they worried about their children's mental health every day during lockdown and 29% noted they were struggling with reassuring their children.[12]

3.2.6　Perhaps unsurprisingly given these concerns, one quarter of parents (24%) noted that the most important thing the Government must do to support children was make funding available for essential children's services including schools, health and wellbeing.[13]

3.2.7　**RECOMMENDATION: The DfE must provide schools the space and support to take a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. This means providing clear guidance that empowers school leaders to focus on wellbeing when schools reopen, recognising that this is important for enabling learning for all children, particularly those who have experienced challenges throughout the lockdown.**

3.2.8　**RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with partners, including at the local community level, to ensure children are able to quickly and easily access mental health and other support services, including bereavement, through online or socially distanced methods. This means supporting local authorities to expand their capacity to deliver these services, increasing access for families to secure technology (see below on digital connectivity), and lowering thresholds so as many children and young people as possible can access services.**

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Unicef UK worked with First News and Opinion Matters to conduct a poll of 755 children aged 6-16 (inclusive).
[11] Unicef UK conducted a Censuswide poll of more than 750 parents of school aged children based on how the response to the Coronavirus has affected their children.
[12] Unicef UK and Censuswide parent poll (see footnote 11).
[13] Ibid.

4 THE EFFECT ON DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

4.1 FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

4.1.1 The impact of the Coronavirus on the economy is likely to be severe. Already before the crisis, 4.2 million children were living in relative low income (after housing costs) in the UK.[14] Unicef UK heard from children in our survey with First News that one in every nine have gone without a meal during lockdown because their parents could not provide it.[15] We also heard of the impact on home finances from parents, with 12% identifying that they had previously been on the brink of financial difficulty and were now going to struggle to make ends meet.[16] This will, in turn, have an impact on their children.

4.1.2 Given this level of food and income insecurity as a result of the crisis, reports that the DfE has confirmed it has no plans to extend the FSM scheme over the 2020 summer holidays are deeply concerning.[17] Already before the pandemic, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger suggested that upwards of 'an estimated three million children risk being hungry in the school holidays.'[18]

4.1.3 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with local authorities, schools, and charities to implement a Free School Meal scheme during the 2020 summer holidays.**

4.1.4 Any increase in poverty is likely to have an impact on children's wellbeing and educational outcomes. Poverty is both a factor in children's underachievement and poor levels of education can lead to poverty in future.[19] This circular relationship could be exacerbated due to the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic downturn.

4.1.5 Anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that in some cases they have stepped in to plug gaps in the support structures available to children. This includes in relation to FSM, a scheme that has been subject to significant challenges during this time. Research is required to understand the comparative outcomes of local school-based schemes versus DfE programming, in order to determine the best possible FSM scheme.

4.1.6 **RECOMMENDATION: Following the end of the lockdown, the DfE should undertake an analysis of local and national FSM programmes to determine relative merits and develop future programming.**

4.1.7 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should consider what additional measures may need to be in place as schools reopen in order to support children who would now meet the threshold of receiving Free School Meals. This could include a recalculation or extension of Free School Meals and increases in support for schools for the 2020/2021 school year, or other measures as set out by families and teachers.**

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[14] *Households Below Average Income: An analysis of the UK income distribution: 1994/95-2018/19*, Department of Work and Pensions, 26 March 2020. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201819.
[15] Unicef UK, First News, and Opinion Matters survey (see footnote 10).
[16] Unicef UK and Censuswide parent poll (see footnote 11).
[17] F.Simpson, 'DfE confirms 'no plans' for free school meals over summer holidays', 26 May 2020. Available at https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/dfe-confirms-no-plans-for-free-school-meals-over-summer-holidays.
[18] A. Forsey, *Hungry Holidays: A report on hunger amongst children during school holidays*, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger, 25 April 2017. Available at https://feedingbritain.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/hungry-holidays.pdf.
[19] 'Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity', Office for National Statistics, 25 February 2020. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity.

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REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Coronavirus pandemic has placed an additional burden – and disproportionately impacted – the education and wellbeing of young refugees and asylum-seekers. Many of these young people lack access to technology and resources that are critical for continuing their learning. Those who are able to physically access online learning may struggle without support at home and with a language barrier, as they seek to learn remotely in their second or third language.[20]

These young people also face significant challenges in mental and emotional wellbeing. Underlying challenges are compounded by uncertainty, triggering impacts of school closures and lockdowns (linked to past experiences), and concerns about loved ones in their home countries. Social isolation and increased poverty also lead to worsening mental health conditions.[21]

While we focus on the school lockdown, vulnerable groups of children such as refugees and asylum-seekers must not be forgotten. Their needs and concerns should be included in all relevant Government responses.

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4.2 INEQUITY AND LEARNING LOSS

4.2.1   All children have a right to a quality education, enshrined in Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC. This education must also follow the principle of non-discrimination – Article 2 – and operate in the best interests of children – Article 3. It is critical that the pandemic and lockdown do not hinder the realisation of these rights for all children.

4.2.2   Unfortunately, the necessary school closures have made quality education for all children challenging. The move to home and online learning, while important for continuity, means many of the most disadvantage children are likely to fall behind. Children in families that cannot afford resources for home learning activities, where parents have low levels of educational attainment or are not fluent English speakers, or where there is inadequate space or digital connectivity for effective learning, are all likely to be held back from receiving the same education as their peers.

4.2.3   The evidence is clear that learning inequity is a reality during lockdown. In Unicef UK's survey with First News, one in 12 (8.6%) children said they were not being home-schooled during lockdown.[22] Evidence from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reinforces this claim, with 30.7% of parents who had not worked in the past seven days (24 April to 3 May) also reporting that they had not home-schooled their child.[23] It is clear that children are not realising their right to education equally during this time.

4.2.4   The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that 'school closures are almost certain to increase educational inequalities', given the significant differences in support received by better-off and poorer students.[24] In better off families, children are spending 30% more time learning at home than in poorer families. The ONS reports that 42.6% of parents cite limited or no suitable space to work and study as affecting their ability to continue their children's home learning, and 35.9% cite limited or no access to equipment.[25] These are barriers that will likely be more acute for families from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

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[20] *COVID-19 crisis: emerging impact on young refugees' education and wellbeing in the UK*, Refugee Support Network, 23 April 2020. Available at https://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/resources/21-covid-19-crisis-policy-briefing-and-recommendations.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Unicef UK, First News, and Opinion Matters survey (see footnote 10).

[23] *Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 14 May 2020*, Office of National Statistics, 14 May 2020. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata/current

[24] A. Andrew et al, 'Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning', Institute for Fiscal Studies, 18 May 2020, https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848.

[25] *Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 14 May 2020*, Office of National Statistics, 14 May 2020. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongre

4.2.5 Schools may struggle to fill this gap, however, when children return to school. One in four (27%) teachers reported not feeling confident that they could help pupils to catch up on the learning missed during lockdown.[26] Over half (54%) reported not having the financial resources available to provide the support pupils need when they return.

4.2.6 Parents share these concerns, with 32% highlighting that the most important measure the Government should take to support children and young people after lockdown was to provide clear guidance on how children can make up for months of school closures.[27]

4.2.7 **RECOMMENDATION: In order to address the impact of school closures and limit the exacerbation of educational inequalities, the DfE should work with children, families, teachers and local councils to understand their needs and provide the necessary support to address these.**

4.2.8 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should develop a costed and comprehensive recovery plan that includes support, academic and pastoral, for all children with a focus on the most disadvantaged. This plan must be informed by children, teachers, families, and local authorities, with all acknowledged as key partners in development and delivery of the plan.**

4.3   DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

4.3.1 The move to home-learning has seen a widespread adoption of online learning methods. With innovation lying in the internet, it is deeply concerning that, in 2019, Lloyds Bank reported that '700,000 young people have inadequate home access for school work.'[28]

4.3.2 While this number gives some indication of scale, no definitive data on children's access to the internet and technology during lockdown exists. Without comprehensive data, it is difficult to address this gap in provision and the subsequent impact on equality. During lockdown, specific factors such as reliability of internet connections, increased use of prepaid data, and limited access to home hardware (for example due to parents' homeworking arrangements) all need evaluating. At a time when children are asked more than ever before to use the internet and technology to access their education, this is a serious concern.

4.3.3 We recognise and welcome the DfE's commitment to getting these children online. The efforts made to provide disadvantaged children across England with access to broadband and laptops should be supported. However, concerns remain about the breadth of these initiatives. For example, is it enough to provide only care leavers, children and young people with a social worker, and disadvantaged year 10 pupils with these resources, when so many other children lack adequate support to access online learning?

4.3.4 Furthermore, we question the timeframe for this process. There are delays in getting laptops and routers to children, with the first technology arriving in late May or June. This means these young people will have gone without access for seven weeks of the school year. Given this, it is likely that they will be in need of catching up over the summer holidays. There is still a question of whether or not pupils will be allowed to keep their resources over the summer holidays, or if schools will collect these back once term officially ends.

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[26] Unicef UK polling (see footnote 3).
[27] Unicef UK and Censuswide parent poll (see footnote 11).
[28] *Digital access, skills and confidence among 11-18 year olds in the UK*, Lloyds Bank, February 2019, available at https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/CDI-2019-report-11-18yrs.pdf.

4.3.5 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE must urgently assess the gap in digital connectivity for children, undertaking comprehensive data collection to understand the scale of the issue.**

4.3.6 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should provide clarity on the timeframe for the digital connectivity scheme, including confirmation that young people will be able to keep their laptops and any broadband hardware over the summer holidays.**

4.3.7 Given that only a few year groups are invited back in to school in June, and that some children within these groups (including those who are shielding or who have extremely vulnerable family members) are unlikely to go back to school, the need to support online learning and digital connectivity is critical. It should be assumed that the need to support distance learning for a significant proportion of children will continue throughout the summer term, and possibly longer.

4.3.8 Furthermore, the issue of digital connectivity is not one that will disappear with the Coronavirus, as the gap in technology was already in place before the pandemic. Given this, the efforts made by the DfE should be extended beyond schools reopening.

4.3.9 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should develop a comprehensive schools recovery plan, as recommended above, that includes a long-term plan for digital connectivity utilising the infrastructure acquired during the pandemic. This should include strategies for future-proofing the system to prevent children falling behind in the case of future school closures.**

4.3.10 While recognising that need for digital connectivity goes beyond the education, schools are an important hub for identifying students struggling with access and for distributing materials. Indeed, the DfE has rightly recognised schools as a key avenue through which to provide infrastructure to students who may otherwise be disconnected. This welcome step should be further complemented by engagement with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the private sector.

4.3.11 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with BEIS and the private sector to ensure that digital connectivity goes beyond the classroom, ensuring sustainable, fair and equitable delivery beyond lockdown.**

4.3.12 Digital connectivity has three elements: access to fast and reliable internet, access to appropriate devices such as desktops, laptops or tablets, and the necessary skills to utilise the technology and stay safe online. While recognising that the DfE has made welcome strides in the first two of these spaces, the third remains unclear. In a one year period, 79% of children aged 12-15 had potentially harmful online experiences.[29] All children, including those provided with additional infrastructure support through the Government scheme, are likely to have had increased amounts of unsupervised time online. This increases the risk of harm, particularly for vulnerable young people who already at greater risk of harm online.

4.3.13 Whilst it is important that steps are taken to reduce risks to children online, this should be undertaken with respect to their rights to access information (Article 17 of the UNCRC), express themselves (Article 13) and their right to privacy (Article 16). Intense focus on the risks of being

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[29] 'Internet users' experience of harm online 2019', Ofcom, 30 May 2019, available at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/internet-use-and-attitudes/internet-users-experience-of-harm-online-2019.

online can lead to excessively restrictive measures being adopted to protect children from harm which limit their ability to exercise all their rights.

4.3.14 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should ensure that all digital connectivity resources provided to children and young people are accompanied by measured online safety information. These young people should be provided with details of confidential support structures, steps to report concerns on commonly used platforms, and encouraged to improve their digital literacy.**

4.3.15 Soft skills are not just important for children and young people. With digital connectivity already a significant part of young people's lives, and now an increasing feature of their education, it is critical that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support this learning. Teachers do not always know how to effectively support learning through digital platforms and understanding widens according to school context.

4.3.16 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should deliver additional training resources for teachers in digital connectivity, online learning and technology. This should be forward looking, in order to prevent future lost learning in the event of widespread school closures, and should be informed by experiences of the Coronavirus pandemic.**

4.3.17 In addition to soft skills, it is critical that the online environment that children and young people access is safe and regulated. All future policies, including the Online Harms White Paper, must be developed using a child rights approach and with the best interest of children at their core. A multi-sectoral, integrated approach that balances protection and empowerment while supporting the most marginalised groups will be needed. As new and innovative practices are developed and technology rolled out, it is critical that child rights are not ignored in the process.

4.3.18 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with partners, including across the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Home Office, to ensure a child rights approach is used to develop new policies to protect and empower children in the online environment.**

4.3.19 Privacy will be a critical issue for children as the surge in use of edTech and learning platforms puts children's data protection and privacy rights at risk. The Information Commissioner's Office's (ICO) Age Appropriate Design Code, due to be set before Parliament shortly, sets out the standards for ensuring children's rights are respected by online service providers. The DfE should be encouraging all edTech and learning platforms to be working swiftly to implement this guidance and should only recommend those that have made a commitment to respecting children's rights and have conducted a child rights and data protection impact assessment.

4.3.20 **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with BEIS and DCMS to promote the ICO's Age Appropriate Design Code amongst EdTech and learning platforms. Standards for respecting children's data privacy should inform decisions about which platforms are recommended for use by the DfE.**

5 WHAT CONTINGENCY PLANNING CAN BE DONE TO ENSURE THE RESILIENCE OF THE SECTOR IN CASE OF ANY FUTURE NATIONAL EMERGENCY?

5.1   While the Coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented, it is unlikely to be the last major disruption to children's education this century. Indeed, during the 2015-16 and 2019-20 winters, major flooding incidents led to school closures. Even as we begin to re-emerge from lockdown, localised spikes in the virus could result in targeted community lockdowns, in turn leading to further school closures. A second spike of the virus across the UK, as has been suggested as a possibility, could again cause widespread school closures. It is critical, therefore, that we learn from this pandemic and protect children's right to education in future. Schools must be able to smoothly transition between physical and online learning for the foreseeable future.

5.2   To do so, the Government must undertake a comprehensive review of the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on children's education, using the views of children, families, and teachers. This review should support both the aforementioned recovery plan and any policy changes needed to strengthen the system.

5.3   Three key elements of this work should be **mental health support**, **alternative learning pathways**, and **digital connectivity schemes**, recognising the significant impact that the pandemic has had on these areas of children's education.

5.4   Finally, any future preparedness will be contingent on the ability of schools to work together to support children. Ensuring a sense of togetherness and collaboration through crises will be critical to leaving no child behind.

5.5   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with partners to undertake a comprehensive review of the impact of the pandemic on children's lives and learning. This must be informed by families, teachers, and children themselves.**

5.6   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should undertake a collaborative evaluation, in partnership with teachers, parents and children, of the effectiveness, reach, and equity impacts of online learning models, including the Oak National Academy.**

5.7   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should continue to collect and promote examples of effective support provided by schools.**

5.8   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should encourage and support local authorities to monitor the continuing impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children and young people.**

5.9   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should work with partners to assess the current mental health support structures in light of increased need and improve their resilience to future crises, using the learning from the Coronavirus pandemic.**

5.10   **RECOMMENDATION: The DfE should use the innovative practices developed during the Coronavirus pandemic to set-up alternative learning pathways in the case of future pandemics. This includes assessing children's access to digital infrastructure and online safety, and teachers' preparedness for moving learning online.**

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