

Written evidence submitted by the AP/SEND CEO Network

## **The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services – A response from the AP/SEND CEO Network**

The AP/SEND CEO Network is a national organisation which aims to play its full part in creating a world class education system for all children and young people in our care. The role of this group of CEOs is to take the key, senior strategic lead of AP/SEND at a national level. By fearlessly addressing the challenges that prevent or slow down progress towards shared goals, the group will help shape sensible ways for MATs to work together, share resources, and through this proper, pragmatic, collegiate partnership, be a strong voice and advocate at the highest level for all pupils and staff. We will seek to influence policy and policy makers, to highlight conflicts and potential barriers to success, to offer up solutions, and to encourage, challenge, or stimulate innovation.

In responding to the Education Committee's request for evidence the network has consulted extensively with its members. Two members of the network's Executive Group are currently members of the DfE's COVID-19 AP Stakeholder Reference Group.

### **1. 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.**

This has been extremely varied with some LA's interpreting the guidance in different ways to others. AP academies have used the opportunity to be as nuanced as possible with the definition so that as many families can be supported to be able to work as possible.

### **2. The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people**

The experience has been extremely varied depending on the approach of each LA. Some have been extremely proactive and supportive and have engaged fully with AP/SEND provisions whereas others have been passive and at time obstructive. A major concern for some within the network is those who are not currently engaged with Social Care because the referrals have not met thresholds or due to the families refusing to engage with support. These young people are considered to be highly vulnerable. Resourcing does seem to be an issue overall as capacity has not always been available to support these children and young people and cases have been prioritised. In AP there are high percentages of vulnerable children and support from individual staff in social care varies, as well as there being a variation between LA areas. The number of risk assessments and safety plans have meant that these have not always been coming through in a timely manner when Social Care is leading, and school staff have had to request and prompt. Some LA's have struggled to cope

with working remotely to support the vulnerable pupils. Others have been quick to find ways to work flexibility and creatively where needed.

### **3. The effect of provider closure on the early years sector**

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### **4. The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupil's progression to the next stage of education or employment.**

The response has been extremely varied amongst our pupils. Some of the most vulnerable pupils have been relieved that they do not have the stress or anxiety related to sitting formal exams whereas others have struggled to cope with the 'loss' of their right to sit their exams and be able to demonstrate the progress they have made in their learning. Cancelling formal exams has resulted in a lack of focus and motivation for some Year 11s, who have struggled to see the point in continuing to engage with their education this term. Some will have a gap in education from March to September which will impact on their ability to re-engage with learning in September. A significant concern for many AP leaders is the use of the results from the previous year's learning to moderate the estimated grades being submitted. This is difficult as it does not reflect the improvements made this year or the small and changing cohort year on year. There is a considerable need for continued transition support for Year 11 learners in the first term and a half in their post-16 setting to prevent drop-out or to offer provision that will help them to regain confidence before progressing.

### **5. Support for pupils and families during closures, including:**

Parents and carers have struggled at times with the number of announcements and information being sent out during the pandemic. AP's have tried to interpret this information where possible to support their understanding of some complex and challenging issues. This has generally worked well alongside the extensive work undertaken with families to keep them engaged with their child's learning. AP's have used a wide range of layered interventions to enable this to happen effectively. Many of these have helped relationships to improve with the most challenging families. These interventions have included the use of virtual counselling, mental health support and safety checks via phone, visits (where necessary) and using video calls using clear safeguarding protocols.

Many families have struggled to cope without any remote IT access. Whilst it has been encouraging to see the response to the problem by implementing a national programme of laptops and remote internet access for the most vulnerable pupils the scale of the programme has led to delays in pupils receiving the equipment yet.

## **6. Children and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.**

This has been a considerable challenge for leaders in AP settings due to the vulnerability of our young people. The sector has responded in a clear and focused manner using a wide range of nuanced and layered strategies. Many AP settings have tried to maintain as much of a structure to the school day where possible which mirrors the pupils' usual experience. This has helped to provide some structure and routine to their day at home. AP settings have engaged with pupils and their families throughout the pandemic with mentoring sessions taking place virtually and through door-step visits. For many of the most vulnerable pupils they have been contact daily where required and this support has included a range of virtual therapeutic interventions wherever possible. There are significant concerns about the impact of the time away from their settings for pupils when planning for the phased return to schools. Many leaders are reporting concern about the anxiety levels of the most vulnerable pupils when considering the phased return to their settings.

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

A significant number of AP academies and free schools are commissioned by schools and other settings to support their work with pupils at risk of exclusion. Many are reporting concerns that the financial constraints that will be placed on these settings may lead them to reduce the amount of support they are prepared to pay for. This could have a significant impact on inclusion across the country. Many AP leaders are also concerned that a wide range of high-quality AP providers who work in partnership with AP academies will have to close due to reported financial constraints. This will have a significant impact on the quality of educational offer for our learners during the next academic year.

## **8. 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 challenges of planning for FSM distribution among all disadvantaged groups were considerable. The most effective AP settings and trust's quickly bridged that gap in the early phase of the pandemic to ensure that pupils were not disadvantaged. Considerable work continues to take place across the sector to ensure that young people and their families receive the support they need.

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

Considerable work needs to be undertaken to ensure that the learning from the current pandemic is captured extensively. This has not always happened in relation to previous critical incidents in this country. Lessons can be learnt from looking at how other countries have supported their young people to return to school following significant critical incidents. The existing issue of local variation in quality of LA provision and response to the current pandemic needs to be addressed in future plans. Only then can the associated risks of variability in local performance be mitigated.

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