

Written evidence submitted by the County Councils Network

## **The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services**

### **SUMMARY**

- At present the pandemic is expected to add £132m in costs to children's social care in county areas.
- Significant numbers of children and their families are likely to be particularly hard hit by a number of potential calamities due to Covid-19. This will be dependent on as-yet-unknown factors including the length of time different parts of England remain in lockdown; how quickly the economy recovers; and the potential threat of further waves of the virus in the future.
- One specific concern is the impact of trauma on children and young people's mental health. The Virtual School's remit should be expanded and given greater resources so that its expertise can also be shared more widely to help local services to respond effectively to the trauma caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- As a consequence of funding reductions over the past five years children's services are underprepared to meet any significant upsurge in need. In particular, the impact on lower-level preventative services means local authorities will have more difficulty in responding as effectively to a rise in need due to less opportunities for identifying vulnerable children and families through, for instance, children's centres or youth clubs.
- These costs do not reflect the potential loss of other streams of funding. In particular the Troubled Families Programme for 2020/1 will be hard to access as the criteria for payment by results (such as school attendance or moving parents into work) are likely to be severely distorted by the impact of lockdown. CCN suggests the Government should disapply payment-by-results criteria for the Troubled Families programme for 2020/21.
- Implementing social distancing is likely to be considerably problematic for provision of Home-to-School Transport (HTST) – potentially creating a logistical and costly burden, particularly for county authorities.
- The Covid-19 outbreak has disrupted the education of all children, including the ability for SEND requirements to be met. In particular frontline NHS services have been unable to prioritise statutory Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments due to focussing on responding to the pandemic. Even despite the pressures on existing local authority resources, this in particular makes it impossible to fulfil local authority duties in the Children and Families Act 2014.
- CCN has noted that there have been increased reporting demands placed on local authorities during the pandemic including on children's services. The frequency and extent of the burdens recently placed on Directors of Children's Services risk dragging attention and resource away from meeting the demand of an urgent and swiftly changing situation on the ground and CCN would urge more flexibility from the Government.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 36 English local authorities that serve counties. CCN's membership includes both county council and county unitary authorities who together have over 2,500 councillors and serve over 26m people (47% of the population) across 86% of England and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities, including children's social care and education services.
2. CCN's member authorities have worked hard during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown to ensure that children's services continue to provide the support that children need and that families are properly supported at this difficult time. However, they remain extremely concerned about the impact of the Covid-19 health emergency both on children's immediate welfare and their long-term wellbeing. This response summarises some of the major concerns which have been raised by our members during the pandemic in relation to children across the gamut of services provided by local authorities.

## **EXPECTED NEED OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

3. There is particular concern about the need which is likely to be created by the impact of the present health emergency – both from the direct effects of Covid-19, but also from the response taken to tackle the virus. **Significant numbers of children and their families are likely to be particularly hard hit by a number of potential calamities:**
  - bereavement of a family member;
  - poverty and hardship caused by unemployment/loss of income due to the economic shutdown;
  - experience and escalation of abuse, domestic violence, or exploitation during lockdown;
  - loss of several months of schooling;
  - continuing illness or ongoing need to isolate due to vulnerability even after lockdown is lifted;
  - enforced relocation/new school due to circumstances caused by the impact of Covid-19;
  - developmental trauma caused by all of the above, alongside persistent collective societal messaging which many children are unable to fully grasp or comprehend.
4. **At present it is impossible to estimate with any great certainty how great the need created by any one of these factors will be.** This will be dependent on as-yet-unknown factors including the length of time different parts of England remain in lockdown; how quickly the economy recovers; and the potential threat of further waves of the virus in the future.
5. However, initial estimates suggest it will produce an upsurge in children and families needing support from their local authority. Since lockdown:
  - as few as 1% of vulnerable children have been attending school<sup>1</sup>;
  - Children's Social Care referrals are reported to have as much as halved<sup>2</sup> suggesting pent-up demand;

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/22/make-it-compulsory-for-vulnerable-children-to-go-to-school-no-10-urged>

<sup>2</sup> *ADCS president: children's social care referrals down by up to half*, Local Government Chronicle 23 April 2020

- calls to domestic abuse helplines have increased by 120%<sup>3</sup>; and
  - police have warned that school closures have if anything, put children more at risk of exploitation through county lines drug trading even despite restrictions on travel<sup>4</sup>.
6. **Crucially, county authorities anticipate the impact of the virus will create need from children and families not previously known to the council.** This may mean additional challenges in identifying families in need of support, or an additional cost burden resulting from an increase in support that is required for families.

### **MENTAL HEALTH/IMPACT OF TRAUMA**

7. One specific concern is the impact of trauma on children and young people's mental health. Health experts and the NHS are already warning of the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health lasting a decade<sup>5</sup>. Over recent years local authorities already have built up significant expertise in supporting professionals working with children to understand and manage the impact of trauma on young people – most often situated within the Virtual School. **The Virtual School's remit should be expanded and given greater resources so that this expertise – currently focussed on the needs of looked after children – can also be shared more widely to help local services to respond effectively to the trauma caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.**

### **FUNDING OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

8. CCN recently published the report *Children's Services Funding and Early Intervention*<sup>6</sup>, showing how funding of local authority children's services has changed since 2015/6. Key findings of the report include:
- total local authority grant funding for children's social care has declined by over 35% for CCN Members, faster than the English average where funding has been cut by 25%;
  - the cost to counties of providing these services over the same time period increased by £600m;
  - as a consequence of this 'perfect storm' of declining funding and rising costs, local authorities have had to reduce their total expenditure on 'early intervention' services (e.g. youth services and children's centres) by 18% in order to meet their statutory duties – such as addressing the 15% increase in looked after children in the last five years (compared to 12% nationally).
9. Although core grant funding for Adult Social Care decreased at a similar rate since 2015/6, the overall trend has been substantially mitigated by the introduction of Temporary Grant Funding since 2017/8. However, **Children's Social Care has received 20 times less Temporary Grant Funding than Adult Social Care during the past five years.**

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/22/every-abuser-is-more-volatile-the-truth-behind-the-shocking-rise-of-domestic-violence-killings>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/13/gangs-still-forcing-children-into-county-lines-drug-trafficking-police-covid-19-lockdown>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-mental-health-children-nhs-england-a9532886.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3003/>

10. As a consequence of these reductions children's services are underprepared to meet any significant upsurge in need. In particular, the impact on lower-level preventative services means local authorities will have more difficulty in responding as effectively to a rise in need due to less opportunities for identifying vulnerable children and families through, for instance, children's centres or youth clubs.
11. The above report was due to be launched just as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, substantially shifting the context in which CCN member authorities are now working. As such CCN has also issued an accompanying paper – *Recovering from Covid-19: Supporting Children and Families*<sup>7</sup>. New analysis in this report from CCN member authorities' has shown that at present **the pandemic is expected to add almost £132m in costs to children's social care in county areas:**

Children's Social Care - workforce pressures:	£18,632,000
Children's Social Care - residential care:	£58,219,000
Children's Social Care - care leavers:	£6,039,000
Children's Social Care – other:	£48,914,000

**TOTAL: £131,804,000**

12. These costs do not reflect the potential loss of other streams of funding. In particular the Troubled Families Programme for 2020/1 will be hard to access as the criteria for payment by results (such as school attendance or moving parents into work) are likely to be severely distorted by the impact of lockdown. Yet this money will be needed by LAs more than ever to support local families who have been affected by the pandemic – many of whom it is anticipated will not previously have been known to us. As such **CCN suggests the Government should disapply payment-by-results criteria for the Troubled Families programme for 2020/21** and instead distribute under 'earned autonomy' status to all local authorities.
13. It is important to note that these additional costs are unlikely to be covered by the £3.2bn already provided to local authorities (£1.16bn for county authorities). This is due to the extensive demands being made across all council services, including a particular expectation that a significant portion of this money will be used for Adult Social Care.
14. The impact of the pandemic is likely to be long and far-reaching, with some of the specific medium- and long-term costs and challenges outlined further in this response. The findings of CCN's research emphasise that **to meet these challenges is vital that local authorities are provided with the requisite resources to tackle issues arising from Covid-19** not just for the remainder of the present financial year, but across the coming decade. CCN therefore believes the Government must:
- **ensure a long-term funding settlement for Children's Social Care in the Spending Review;**
  - **address the inequities in funding for children's services in county areas;**
  - **set out a long-term plan for funding early intervention beyond March 2021 including renaming and rebranding the Troubled Families programme for the new decade;**

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3007/>

- **consider building on the reported success of the Troubled Families programme<sup>8</sup> in helping families by increasing the scope of investment via a new National Framework for Early Intervention. This could target 'social infrastructure' funding for a wider range of services such as those in mental health or supporting transitions to adulthood for young people.**

## **EDUCATION**

### *(i) Home to School Transport*

15. CCN member authorities support the ambition that children are able to return to school as soon as it is safe for them to do so. Local authorities understand this can only be done with a level of social distancing being put in place, both within the school setting but also on Home to School Transport (HTST). **However, social distancing is likely to be considerably problematic on HTST – potentially creating a logistical and costly burden that will predominantly fall on county authorities.**
16. **This is against a background of fast increasing HTST costs in recent years and the disproportionate impact in county areas** which often require children to be transported over long distances to attend school or college: it has previously been estimated that the average HTST costs in county areas are £93 per pupil, almost ten times the average in urban and city areas, where the average cost is £10 per pupil. There are additional issues around HTST in meeting the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)<sup>9</sup>.
17. CCN has identified four key issues for ensuring HTST can operate with effective social distancing:
  - *COST*: There is likely to be extremely high costs as existing HTST provision will not be able to carry the same number of children given the requirement to maintain social distancing on HTST. For example, **one reasonably sized county authority has projected it may cost them up to £200,000 a day to meet their duties around HTST under the present guidance for social distancing for reception and years one and six.**
  - *FLEET*: These costs operate under the presumption there will actually be enough vehicles (e.g. buses) to meet demand for social distancing. This is by no means guaranteed and additional demand may substantially drive up price. It is possible there may presently be excess capacity within the commercial coach sector, but it is not clear how long this may remain the case.
  - *PUBLIC TRANSPORT*: Furthermore many children use public transport to get to school. With capacity on trains or buses potentially reduced by more than 80% under present projections this may drive more parents to seek HTST for their children.
  - *PPE*: There is an expectation that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will need to be supplied to ensure the safety of those providing transport – including bus drivers and taxi drivers – adding an additional cost burden, particularly at a time when PPE is already in short supply.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/19/labelling-families-troubled-isolates-communities-secretary-says/>  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/790402/Troubled\\_Families\\_Programme\\_annual\\_report\\_2018-19.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790402/Troubled_Families_Programme_annual_report_2018-19.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/1585/>  
<http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/1872/>

18. One additional complicating issue which CCN was dealing with before the pandemic struck is around Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) 2000. These regulations, originally due to come into force on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2020, have the potential to render much of the existing bus and coach fleet as unsuitable for providing HTST. **Due to this issue a one year exemption from PSVAR was granted for HTST until the start of the 2020/21 academic year, but given the impact of Covid-19 CCN believes that this exemption will need to be extended at least until such time that social distancing within HTST is relaxed.**

*(ii) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*

19. Last year CCN published research highlighting the accelerating costs of meeting the needs of children and young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) since reforms introduced in 2015<sup>10</sup>. **It is not overstatement to stress that this has been the single most pressing issue which our members have raised prior to the pandemic with regard to children's services.** Findings of the research included:

- In 2018/9 31 out of CCN's 36 Member Authorities responding to a survey reported a collective £115m overspend.
- Over three quarters of CCN Members anticipated they would overspend on SEND during 2019/20
- The extension of SEND duties from age 18 to 25, whilst well meaning, had not been properly resourced by central government and this new burden was still expected to increase until 2025 as the reforms work their way through the system.
- A particular issue was the increase in children being encouraged to access expensive specialist places rather than inclusion in mainstream schools.

20. The Covid-19 outbreak has disrupted the education of all children, including the ability for SEND requirements to be met. **In particular frontline NHS services have been unable to prioritise statutory Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments due to focussing on responding to the pandemic.** Even despite the pressures on existing local authority resources, this in particular makes it impossible to fulfil local authority duties in the Children and Families Act 2014.

21. Under the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 the Secretary of State for Education has relaxed these duties so that local authorities should use "reasonable endeavour" to meet SEND requirements. However, our members' experience is that this ambiguous phrase is subject to interpretation and some have been threatened with legal action by some families who expect 'business as usual' despite the unprecedented circumstances. **Unless SEND duties are suspended in full for the duration of the pandemic and while education is disrupted, this risks precious resource and attention being spent fending off legal challenges rather than focussing on the key objectives of supporting the whole community through the crisis and into recovery.**

## **REPORTING REQUIREMENTS ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/2314/>

22. CCN has noted that there have been increased reporting demands placed on local authorities during the pandemic including on children's services. Whilst our members understand the political desire for assurances about the safety and wellbeing of the vulnerable groups of children identified by ministers back in March, the reporting requirements have been developed with only limited input of professionals.
23. CCN believe that the impact and value of the combined efforts of schools and children's services in responding to the pandemic cannot be measured via data alone – especially as much of the data being asked for may be misleading in the present unprecedented circumstances. The frequency and extent of the burdens recently placed on Directors of Children's Services risk dragging attention and resource away from meeting the demand of an urgent and swiftly changing situation on the ground and CCN would urge more flexibility from the Government.

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