

Written evidence submitted by the Cheshire West and Chester County Council (CW&C), Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) and non-profit Social Finance

## Select Committee Submission: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

04 June 2020

### **Summary of submission**

Cheshire West and Chester County Council (CW&C), Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) and non-profit Social Finance are submitting this evidence jointly, in line with our ongoing partnership under the Maximising Access to Education programme<sup>1</sup>. This partnership is developing an evidence-based response to support disadvantaged pupils with additional needs in school, with the aim of improving early support for these pupils and reducing exclusions in the long-term.

We hope to support the Department for Education to learn from, and prepare for, the impact of Covid-19. We recognised the extremely challenging environment that both central and local government have been responding to at pace during this period, so aim to provide evidence which is useful and applicable for forward thinking.

We have provided joint evidence for four of the Select Committee's questions with key points summarised below:

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***
  - **Time pressure**: The rapid nature of school closures was a challenge for schools across both areas, putting particular strain on their ability to plan staffing, identify the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, and make arrangements to ensure adequate safeguarding.
  - **Defining critical workers**: Local authorities have, at times, felt a lack of clarity around expectations of their roles and responsibilities. They were keen to provide guidance that was aligned with, and did not undermine, that of central government. However, delays between public announcements and the issuing of guidance often meant schools and local authorities had to make assumptions which sometimes led to conflicting information, creating confusion locally.
  - **Identifying critical workers**: Data on critical workers had not been recorded by schools, nor requested by DfE previously. Local authorities were therefore under intense pressure to

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Maximising Access to Education' programme is part of Social Finance's Impact Incubator. The Impact Incubator is a collaboration between charitable foundations and Social Finance, that works with partners to tackle entrenched issues and create lasting, systems-level change by developing and implementing responses. In the context of this programme, Social Finance is working in partnership with two local authorities (Cheshire West and Chester County Council and Gloucestershire County Council) to transform how they identify and support children at risk of exclusion. The programme will develop data insights on 'who' is being excluded, explore 'what' interventions and quality assurance are needed, and understand 'how' local systems should support this. Social Finance is also capturing and disseminating learnings, as part of longer-term national work in collaboration with partners.

conduct these surveys effectively and rapidly. In future, the identification of vulnerable children could be facilitated by more routinely joining up datasets across agencies. This would provide quicker and clearer real time information for decision-making.

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

- Lack of clarity on 'vulnerability': More detailed early guidance on the meaning of 'vulnerable children' could have avoided confusion between different sectors who use the term differently. Given the delayed extension of some of the criteria, there is concern certain vulnerable groups may have 'slipped through the net' until recently.
- Access to services: There is a concern that for some children their situations will have deteriorated. These increased needs may only be established once they return to school, potentially causing additional pressure on universal and children's services to respond. In particular, Social Emotional and Mental Health needs have been identified as an increasing under-supported issue in schools.
- Capacity and collaboration: Local collaboration has been excellent as schools, local authorities and wider services have worked well together to find solutions and interpret national guidance for local delivery – however, they would have benefited in a stronger voice in the national guidance and more local decision making for speed of response.
- Exclusions: Without targeted intervention to pupils who need it, there is a risk we will experience a significant increase in exclusions across both local areas, resulting in a significant increase in social and economic costs. We cite a number of reasons for this, showing that support needs to be targeted to those pupils early.

**3. *Support for pupils and families during closures, including: 1) The consistency of messaging from schools on remote learning, 2) Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education***

- Consistency of messaging from schools on remote learning: The inconsistency in learning materials provided and feedback from schools has highlighted a need for a central bank of materials. This would have been useful if organised by key stage or developmental stage and with supporting materials to aid the parents' understanding of the subject matter.
- Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education: For some children, "home" will not have been a safe place during this crisis. If they haven't been identified as vulnerable and been offered a place or haven't attended school for other reasons, they are now likely to be at increased risk of returning to school with additional mental health and other support needs.

**4. *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)***

- Free school meals: The voucher scheme was useful for those in big towns and cities, however, in rural areas the vouchers were not accepted in local food outlets as they are not the participating supermarkets. This led to the responsibility for organising food distribution falling back to schools, whilst at the same time providing support to the pupils accessing the school site and learning at home.
- Vulnerable children (SEND, CiN, CPP, LAC): Social Finance's data analysis in CW&C identified a small cohort who represent 15% of pupils but account for 58% of persistently disruptive behaviour, absenteeism and disengagement from school. Many of these pupils will be the hardest hit by the crisis - for example children who have learning needs but do not reach the threshold for EHCP, therefore missing out on support during this period.

- Capacity for parent support: Access to the internet and devices has been an issue as some families on lower incomes cannot pay for the internet and or have devices to access learning online. There is also the issue of those children who live in homes where parents have not been able to support the learning of their children or maintain routines for them. As well as level of education, parental mental ill health can be a factor in parent/carer ability to provide home schooling opportunities and child wellbeing.

### **Time to Act**

We also provide key indications of potential solutions and areas to explore to support this cohort with the return to school and post-Covid-19 learning. Our partnership is hoping to launch the Covid-19 response 'ACT' (Analyse, Codify, Target) in response to many of the issues raised in this call for evidence:

- **Analyse** - Data for identification of vulnerable pupils and emerging needs
- **Codify** - Learning from lockdown: building resilience in schools and Local Authorities
- **Target** - Compensating for the disproportionate impact of the pandemic

Building on our experience and strengths, we believe that we can offer a platform for rapid learning and the design of a Covid-19 local infrastructure response to support schools and local authorities. We are able to mobilise quickly to test and learn from the impact of Covid-19 on pupils, schools and local authorities. To achieve this, we can draw on our established relationships in these two local areas, our wider strategic work around supporting young people and our organisational strength of achieving change through combining a data-informed approach with a focus on the needs of the individual.

This work could offer valuable and timely insights on what is needed and what works at a local infrastructure level, making a significant contribution to central government's current thinking and planning of a national response.

We have included details on the ACT programme in relevant sections below.

## **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**

### Time pressure

The rapid nature of school closures was understandably a challenge for schools across Gloucestershire and Cheshire West and Chester. Feedback from schools indicated time pressure put particular strain on their ability to plan staffing; identify which children's parents' were critical workers; work with social workers to identify which vulnerable children should be in school and make arrangements to ensure adequate safeguarding.

The announcement also changed the concept of what schools 'closing' means. For example in GCC, 95% of schools have been open and open for longer than usual (Easter and Half-term). There has been very effective work done locally with the NHS to ensure provision has been in place for children of their staff. This has gone well beyond regular 'school provision' and moved to childcare provision, given that for example after school clubs all shut down. The local authority is now working with local stakeholder to find solutions for the summer period, when schools will actually be closed and many critical workers will have childcare issues.

### Defining critical workers

In the environment of extreme pressure over recent months, responsibility and accountability for decision making has fallen between local and central government. There was an appreciation by schools and local authorities that this was an unprecedented situation, so the guidance and process was not necessarily going to be robust and straight forward as this was the first occurrence of a lockdown situation. However, the delays between announcements on the government's daily briefings and corresponding guidance being published, created significant challenges locally. Timelier issuance of guidance from central government following public announcements would have allowed for a smoother and more effective translation of guidance into practice at the local level.

The implementation of the critical workers policy is a key example of this as local authorities, were keen to provide guidance that was aligned with, and did not undermine, that of central government. This resulted in delays in sending guidance to schools. In the meantime, many felt they had to make a number of assumptions about what the criteria would include in order to start preparations. When guidance was then released, significantly more parents than expected were included – some schools had to subsequently plan for up to 20% attendance, much higher than initially thought. This is because some critical workers roles were not immediately apparent to schools. Also, the guidance did not provide a lot of detail, which led to confusion and some conflict with parents. A particular conflict in the guidance was between 'the safest place for a child was at home' and 'if one parent was a key worker then they could access school place'. This led to situations where schools declined to accept children where one parent was a key worker because they knew one parent was at home so believed the child was safer at home. Also, the lack of clarity from employers, meant that individuals struggled to evidence to schools that they fell into this category.

Schools and local authorities therefore felt they had to interpret guidance, without having the clarity of being involved in its development or the rationale behind it. The councils engaged with the RSC office, conscious that this felt more like a conduit to central government policy than a decision-making body during this period. This has resulted in a feeling of lack of clarity directly from the government to local authorities around expectations of their roles and responsibilities, despite the Department directing schools to local authorities within guidance. For example, initial communications regarding exclusions (during the first week of lockdown)

were understood to indicate it was up to local authorities to make decisions, however the guidance released later on provided conflicting information, which created some confusion locally. More detailed guidance on the critical workers and the role of local authorities, would be extremely helpful in future contexts – guidance which would ideally empower responsive local decision making.

### Identifying critical workers

Further to the challenge around defining ‘critical workers’ schools and local authorities could not easily access the relevant data to identify them. The lack of joined up datasets across agencies made this a further challenge. This is because prior to this, such data had not been collected or recorded by schools, nor requested by DfE. To mitigate this, schools and local authorities in CW&C collaborated to carry out a survey of all students in order to establish if their parents or carers met any of the key worker criteria. However due to the three-day period between clarification on guidance and the deadline to provide childcare, the local authority and schools were under intense pressure to conduct this survey effectively and rapidly.

Also, school closures led to local authorities losing attendance data, which would have been valuable at the local level, had it been adapted in time. GCC also worked to quickly collect relevant data from schools on critical workers and vulnerable children but this was a challenge, particularly when engaging Academies – some of which are yet to reply as they do not recognise the local authorities’ need for such data. This is despite the DfE’s clear guidance that local authorities are responsible for tracking vulnerable children. Clarifying the role of local authorities for all schools would help these processes and communications in future scenarios.

Joined up datasets across agencies would greatly improve the capacity and ability of schools and local authorities to identify particular children in different contexts. For the critical workers policy new data had to be collected. However, to identify vulnerable children (see below) existing datasets could be more routinely joined up, an approach pioneered by the data analysis conducted by Social Finance. If the joining up of related datasets was done on a regular basis, this would provide quicker and clearer real time information for decision-making.

### Time to ACT

Given the important experiences and crucial learnings around implementing the critical workers policy and managing the school closure process, we have an opportunity to learn from lockdown and build resilience in schools and Local Authorities for potential future lockdowns.

This is reflected in the **Codify** strand of the ACT programme. Learning from what works and what hasn’t worked will help to create resilience in the system and give all stakeholders across the educational setting and children’s services a head start during any potential future lockdown. Codifying methodology, approach and learnings is of great value, esp. with regard to sharing best practice and informing evidence-based decision-making. We would make any codified approaches available to other interested LAs and work with our existing partners across the sector to further share our work and disseminate our learnings.

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

### Lack of clarity on 'vulnerability'

More detailed early guidance on the meaning of 'vulnerable children' could have avoided confusion between different sectors who use the term differently. For example, vulnerable children within education encompasses a far broader range of needs than just having a social worker or EHCP. The local authorities and schools found it challenging to work together to identify other key cohorts of children such as children at SEN support – in particular SEMH needs, young carers, children on the edge of care, children at risk of exploitation but not yet under social worker, and others who are supported through Early Help arrangements led by practitioners within universal settings e.g. schools, early years settings and through voluntary and community groups.

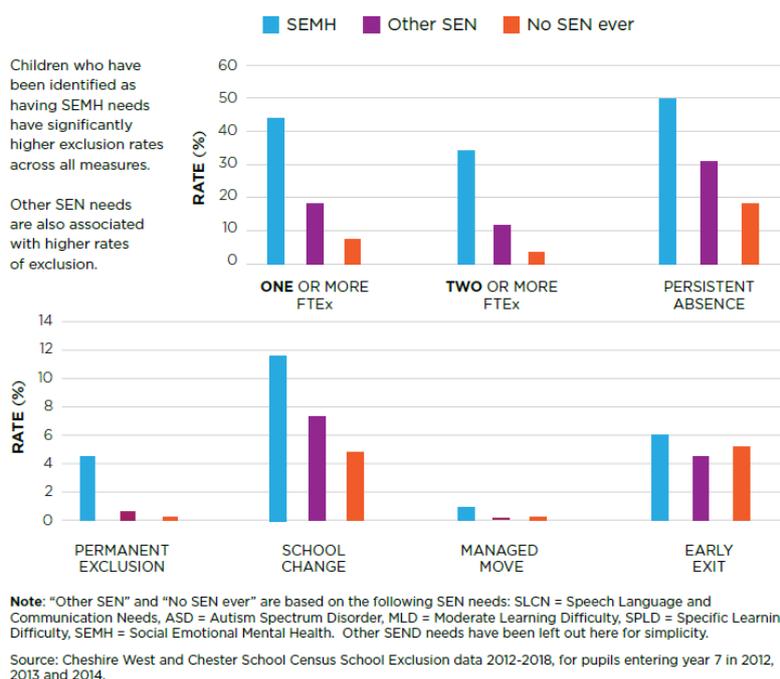
The delayed extension in the criteria to incorporate more of these children then required a very comprehensive RAG Rating Assessment to re-assess vulnerability against it. There is general concern that children on the edge of services, or where professionals felt the child could be at risk of being vulnerable, may have 'slipped through the net' until recently and therefore been without any teaching input since schools closed. Arrangements to monitor the lived experiences of children with vulnerabilities who have 'stayed home' are inconsistent across local areas, dependent solely on the capacity and outreach practice of individual practitioners in schools and nursery settings.

### Access to services

There is a concern that for some children their situations will have deteriorated. These increased needs may only be established once they return to school, potentially causing additional pressure on universal and children's services to respond. In particular, we expect to see an increase in referrals for children unable to attend school because of a medical condition linked to Covid-19 return to school anxiety.

Prior to the crisis, Social Finance's data analysis in Cheshire West and Chester found that certain thresholds for support prevent pupils with high levels of needs (often multiple that do not meet any single threshold) from receiving the support they need from children's services. For example, pupils with experiences of trauma such as bereavement cannot access extra support – this may become a key gap in support in the context of the pandemic as the numbers of bereavements have increased across the country. In particular, Social Emotional and Mental Health needs were an increasing under-supported issue in schools, where pupils with such needs were found to be over-represented in groups with learning and behavioural difficulties in school. The graph below shows that children with SEMH needs in Cheshire West and Chester are at significantly higher risk to experience all forms of exclusion, incl. multiple fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions.

Access to children's mental health services (including CAMHS) has been significantly impacted by the Covid situation and it is likely to have exacerbated issues for children. It is therefore anticipated that there will be a need for additional resources due to the impact Covid is likely to have on children's mental health. Without identifying the children with SEMH needs and supporting them early, permanent exclusions and other forms of exclusions are likely to rise which will result in a steep increase in associated social and economic costs.

**Figure 10: Exclusion rate by SEN status, SEMH specific.**

### Capacity and collaboration

This unique situation meant that agencies needed to work together more efficiently within more challenging circumstances. Local collaboration has been excellent as schools, local authorities and wider services have generally worked well together to find solutions and interpret national guidance for local delivery – however, they would have benefited in a stronger voice in the national guidance and more local decision making for speed of response. This would have eased the pressure on capacity, which was particularly challenging in regard to schools' ability to work with social care to encourage vulnerable children to attend the setting. Also, a number of agencies who support vulnerable children appeared to cease their services putting increased pressure on schools and social care. For example, CAMHS closed a large number of cases to focus on NHS frontline provision where families were waiting for initial assessment, and stopped taking new referrals.

In the last few months there have been very quick and positive developments that are enabling effective virtual multi-agency working. At the start of lockdown, the local authorities were not well equipped to cope with this change in operating practice, particularly the dramatic change to working methods including the technological and cultural systems and habits for remote working. However, good systems have been put in place, which will provide a positive legacy for culture change post Covid-19.

### Exclusions

Without targeted intervention to pupils at particular risk of having increased needs, there is a risk we will experience a significant increase in exclusions across both local areas for a number of reasons:

- 1) The Department's recommendation that schools include additions to their behaviour policies around following Covid-19 guidelines in schools has resulted a number of fixed term exclusions and is likely to continue to increase – this is a particular risk for vulnerable children (see 2);

- 2) Children at risk of exclusion, and therefore with increased risk of becoming NEET in the future, were not included in the guidance on vulnerable children until very recently. These children were therefore not captured in the original childcare offer unless they also fell into another category – this is likely to have led to increased needs during this period.
- 3) The return to school after this prolonged period of time that the child has been out of school is expected to impact presenting behaviours of children with additional needs, who've lacked support during this period;
- 4) Prior to this crisis, Social Finance's research across schools in both councils found that some schools were resorting to excluding children to trigger support for the pupil and to decrease pressure on their school budgets. This phenomenon may be exacerbated following the lockdown and increased pressures on schools.

An increase in permanent exclusions has serious cost implications for local authorities as this will likely lead to budgetary pressures and overspend on the high needs budget. In order to prevent this phenomenon from occurring more frequently across schools and local authorities in England when schools return, the most at-risk pupils need to be identified early so support can be targeted to them.

#### Time to ACT

Identifying the most vulnerable pupils and those with needs that are emerging or increasing as a result of COVID-19 has been one of the biggest challenges facing the Government during this crisis. Yet this will be a crucial part of supporting the return after lockdown and preventing schools and local authorities from becoming overwhelmed. Collecting and analysing the right data will allow schools and local authorities to make informed decisions about who to support now, to prevent a potential increase in needs and the ensuing rise in social and economic costs in the future. The **Analyse** workstream of ACT is looking to tackle this challenge. By repurposing our previous data analysis we propose to build a holistic picture of the current pupil cohort in our two partner LAs and identify those most in-need and at-risk of becoming in-need both during and after this lockdown. This will inform the LA's ability to effectively target resources and support, as well as our understanding of potential underlying characteristics shared between those vulnerable pupils that are currently not presenting in schools and how best to support them in the community.

By repurposing and adapting this analysis, Social Finance could offer valuable and timely insights to local authorities, schools and the central government to help make local systems more resilient and resourceful in the medium-to-longer-term. Identifying children early and enabling early intervention will have a significant impact in the short- and medium- as well as long-term by preventing a significant increase in needs in the future.

### **3. Support for pupils and families during closures, including: 1) The consistency of messaging from schools on remote learning, 2) Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

#### Consistency of messaging from schools on remote learning

Support from teachers to encourage participation in learning during lockdown has been hugely variable due to schools determining provision, with some schools providing significant online and virtual learning with frequent feedback and contact with parents, whilst other schools have provided very little virtual lessons and feedback. Oak Academy was a positive step to improving access for children and parents, however many families did not have the capacity or the means to do so. Given these assumptions are not always given, a lot of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will have not had any kind of teaching input since the lockdown began.

Feedback from a District Youth Council highlighted the possible impact of inconsistent amount of work and learning tasks from schools on pupil anxiety and mental health or well being. Some pupils work well without direct teacher support whilst others struggle to learn this way. There will be pressure on schools as children return to provide individualised learning plans, which will require more teaching resource. In Gloucestershire, the challenge of reopening is felt by smaller schools with less staffing resource and less physical space to offer to children. Though schools have mostly worked well with partnership arrangements to support each other.

As a reaction to Covid-19, various organisations and businesses have made learning resources available to families, but the wealth and variety of resources available has made it challenging for some parents to know what to do. In the context of inconsistent learning materials and feedback from schools, this has highlighted the need for a central bank of materials. This would have been useful if organised by key stage or developmental stage and with supporting materials to aid the parents' understanding of the subject matter.

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

During the month of May in Gloucestershire, 70% of the referrals to the Children's Helpdesk stated 'parenting support' as a need – demonstrating the pressure that the lockdown is having on parents' capacity to meet the competing demands on family life during this period. A third of the total referrals to the Children's Helpdesk result in a referral to the locality safeguarding teams and a further third result in a referral for Early Help. This places a significant demand upon local authority resources at a time when much needed community services have had to reduce/withdraw provision.

Impact of Domestic Abuse on children is well documented and during Covid many more children will have been subjected to living in homes where DA is present. For many of these children school was their safe place and the lack of this will have a significant impact on their current and long term mental health. According to the Children's Commissioner Vulnerability Profiles, in Cheshire West and Chester 4,204 children live in households where parents suffer from domestic abuse. This puts Cheshire West and Chester in the 38<sup>th</sup> percentile rank amongst LAs (0 = Lowest Rate, 100 = Highest Rate). For some of these children, "home" will not have been a safe place during this crisis. If they haven't been identified as vulnerable and been offered a place or haven't attended school for other reasons, they are now likely to be at increased risk of returning to school with additional mental health and other support needs.

#### 4. 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)

##### Free school meals

The distribution of free school meals has been a challenge for schools due to the time pressures on the tight turn around for distribution. The voucher scheme was useful for those in big towns and cities however in rural areas the vouchers were not accepted in local food outlets as they are not the participating supermarkets. This led to the responsibility for organising food distribution falling back to schools, whilst at the same time providing support to the pupils accessing the school site and learning at home. The National Voucher scheme was welcomed by local authorities and schools, but could have been better organised and managed on a local level.

##### Vulnerable children (SEND, CiN, CPP, LAC)

The inconsistency of schools to provide learning materials will have a significant impact on those children who have learning needs that do not reach the threshold for EHCP. These children did not fall into the Government's vulnerable children categories, so did not have the opportunity to access school despite having additional learning needs. They have been subject to inconsistent learning materials being made available and so the likelihood is that the gap between themselves and their peers will have continued to widen.

Social Finance's data analysis in Cheshire West and Chester identified a small cohort who represent 15% of pupils but account for 58% of persistently disruptive behaviour, absenteeism and disengagement from school. This cohort are the most vulnerable children and are identified by having contact with social care (such as being a Child in Need, Looked After Child or having a Child Protection Plan) and having SEND needs, particularly SEMH needs. Many of these pupils were captured by the Government's 'vulnerable children' categories, but have not been attending school during this period. With this cohort, data shows absenteeism from school generally indicates increasing needs. For this reason, ACT aims to identify these children early, understand the shared characteristics between children not presenting in schools, and targeting the right support to them when they return to compensate for the disproportionate impact of the crisis on these pupils.

##### Capacity for parent support

Access to the internet and devices has been an issue as some families on lower incomes cannot pay for the internet and or have devices to access learning online. In Gloucestershire rurality plays a factor in children's access to the internet, according to the vulnerability profile by the Children's Commissioner, its percentile rank amongst other local authorities is 81 for children in households where no home broadband above 2mbps is available, and 95 for children in households where no internet above 10mbps (neither home broadband nor mobile data) is available (0 = Lowest rate, 100 = Highest rate)<sup>2</sup>. Cheshire West and Chester ranks 76 and 72 respectively in the same analysis. This means both councils expect significant learning 'gaps' for these children who come from the most disadvantaged background as many will have lacked teaching input since lockdown began. Although a lot of disadvantaged children would have been entitled to take up the offer of childcare, many families felt discouraged because of wanting to keep their child safe at home. This is understandable in the difficult context of Covid-19, but may have significant implications on the child's learning, social, emotional and mental health especially when looking at the return to school plan.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/our-work/vulnerable-children/local-vulnerability-profiles/>

There is also the issue of those children who live in homes where parents have not been able to support the learning of their children or maintain routines for them. As well as level of education, parental mental ill health can be a factor in parent/carer ability to provide home schooling opportunities and child wellbeing. According to the Children's Commissioners' local vulnerability profiles, Gloucestershire's percentile ranking on children in households where a parent or someone else suffers from mental health issues at 86 and Cheshire West and Chester at 67. This lack of learning coupled with no routine will make it more challenging for those children to return to school.

#### Time to ACT

Considering the likely disproportionate impact of this crisis, it is vital to put in place an infrastructure that allows for compensation in the long run alongside the mitigation of immediate effects.

As part of the **Target** workstream of ACT, we are looking to work with our two partner LAs to establish a local system infrastructure that allows schools and Local Authorities to access contextual decision-making and multi-agency working. This will enable them to provide targeted and, where required, long-term support to vulnerable children, taking into account the complexities of need and recognising that potential needs due to this crisis might only present at a later stage.

This work is crucial in helping prevent schools and local authorities from becoming overwhelmed with the complex needs of particular pupils in the future. A proactive approach to identifying and supporting these pupils will be key to our collective ability to respond in the medium-to-longer-term.

June 2020