

Written evidence from Thomas Pocklington Trust

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

Introduction

This is Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT hereafter) response to the inquiry on the impact of Covid19 on Education and Children's services. TPT strategy focuses upon Education, Employment, and Engagement. We provide grants to sight loss organisations whose work is reflected in our core strategic areas. Our ethos is to support blind and partially sighted people to live the life they want to lead.

To gain evidence of how children and families have been impacted, we conducted a survey of parents of vision impaired children. This survey was open for a 2- week period during May 2020. The survey had 19 questions and gained over 224 responses during this limited timeframe.

Demographics of vision impaired children

There are over 25,000 children with a vision impairment aged 0 to 16 in the UK. Approximately 50% of these children have additional special educational needs or disabilities. Research informs us that vision impaired children have lower educational outcomes than their peers who do not have a special education need or disability. (RNIB 2017).

Demographics of those completing the survey

54% of respondents live in England, with the remaining in the devolved nations. We recognise that this select committee response is for matters pertaining to England only.

91% were parents to children who were between early years and secondary school; detailed breakdown is as follows:

- 14% Early Years
- 45 % Primary
- 32% Secondary
- 9% Sixth Form/College

The children attended the following educational establishments:

- 49% attend a mainstream school with a resource base for pupils with vision impairment
- 16% attend a special school with resource base for pupils with vision impairment
- 2% attend an FE college with provision for their child.
- 34% chose “other”, see below for more in-depth analysis of this category.

From the data received, for the 34% who chose to respond with other, the breakdown is as follows:

- 48 attended a mainstream school/college (with no VI resource base)
- 10 attended a special school (with no VI resource base)
- 14 were preschool age
- 1 was home educated
- 2 attended specialist VI schools

The survey found that 44% of children with a vision impairment also had additional special educational needs, this is reflective of the national data.

Summary of Key findings

Our survey has highlighted the following key issues:

1. Inequality through the provision of specialist software for children to use at home.
2. Inaccessible materials provided to children for their learning.
3. Low levels of support for parents to home school their children.
4. Inconsistent access to support networks for example – QTVI, SENDCO's.
5. Increased levels of anxiety for vision impaired children.

Inquiry Questions and responses

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.

No response to this question.

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

For this response we found that 56% of parents said that they had received support from the school on how to home school their child, but 44% said they had not received any support.

We asked about engagement with QTVI's and whether parents felt they would find it easy to have contacted their child's QTVI during the lockdown period; 55% feel that they would find this easy, with 30% unsure and 14% stating that they would not find this easy. We found that

there were disparities around the support that parents received. Parents commented that:

1. *'We have just been left to it'.*
2. *'The teaching assistant has provided more support than the QTV'I.*

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to Children's early development.

No direct response to the development of early years children. Our survey did not decipher early years learning responses. We have received responses from parents that they are concerned about the impact the school's closures have had on their child's learning.

Some responses from parents:

1. *'I don't feel any child will progress during this period'*
2. *'My child is only 3 and doesn't understand what is going on but misses the routine and misses one to one adult and nursery contact'.*

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

Parents did not respond directly to this but did offer feedback on the impact it had had.

One response to this from a parent in relation to the cancellation of exams:

1. *'There must be some way the government allows for my child to repeat the last 2 terms of their education – they were supposed to be leaving full time education at the end of this academic year so has missed all the important transitioning needed for it to run smoothly - as their course was also part work experience this has also been cancelled so they are missing out on that too - their mental health has been affected greatly as they are aware that they are not doing what they ought to be plus they feel very cut off and isolated.*

There are concerns more generally that vision impaired pupils, through the assessment centre process, will not receive the grades they had hoped for due to how the assessments are being graded. Issues have been raised as to whether the children's' QTVI's will be involved in any of the decisions about grading. Future opportunities for vision impaired children may be impacted by not permitting the formal qualification process to go ahead.

**Support for pupils and families during closures, including:
Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

To respond to this, we asked parents how they and their children were coping mentally during the lock down phase. 29% of families said they felt their child was coping well, with 39% commenting that their child was experiencing some issues. These issues ranged from anxiety around poor access to learning materials (13%), to 29% missing structure and routine. 19% of parents also highlighted that their children were struggling with social isolation because of the pandemic.

- *“Social interaction. Work is not enlarged so can't work independently”*
- *“She is coping OK but lack of routine and adult input she has struggled with. Along with not being able to access work that has been set online. Also worrying as she is in the last year of primary school the panic of transitioning is very worrying for her. She had a big transition package all prepared and the unknown is what she is struggling with the most.”*
- *“He is coping well but I think it is starting to take its toll on him, he is becoming agitated, snappy, argumentative, he misses his routine, his friends, his teachers, school in general, He cannot go out as his little brother is vulnerable so we are all*

having to self-isolate and shield, cutting contact with everybody to 0, we live in a flat so no garden, he is finding not being able to go out tough. He is used to regularly walking to and from school every day.”

Parents commented on their own wellbeing with 24% saying that they were coping well, whilst 50% of parents admitted to finding some elements of being at home difficult.

8.5 % worried about being able to meet their child’s needs. With the second largest issue affecting parent’s wellbeing was their ability to juggle home schooling with other commitments such as their job - 23% of parents were finding this difficult. One parent told us they were exhausted with home schooling.

Interestingly, though when it came to the topic of social isolation which was a big factor in the mental wellbeing of children (19%) only (4%) of parents felt this was impacting them.

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 response to this focuses on the provision of equipment and accessible learning materials. The approach of the department on free school meals was not asked in the survey.

- Key quotations from respondents as follows:
 - *“School are not particularly helpful in relation to vision support; we have purchased recently equipment to help us at home”.*
 - *“He has no individual assistive technology; we use our own iPad and sensory equipment.”*

- *“School iPad here but locked by teacher’s passwords and even though I’ve asked for them I’ve not been given them.”*
- *“the laptop was sent home, but due to settings we are unable to connect it to our Wi-Fi”.*
- *“The school did not allow it until we brought it up the council management chain via the VI Teacher”.*
- *“He already had his own tech at home, QTVI supplied some resources”.*

45% of parents were comfortable supporting their children with the equipment in question, whereas 23% were not.

Parents have responded that they are concerned about the impact the school’s closures have had on their child’s learning. These concerns focus upon inaccessible materials, differences in curriculum/provision of work for vision impaired children, and in some cases limited access to specialist equipment to enable children to learn.

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

Families cited that they have been impacted by the lack of provision of equipment/accessible learning materials for children. We understand that this will be having a financial impact on parents who have purchased equipment to support their children.

- *“We have had to use our own computer and buy a printer to make work accessible”.*
- *“The cost of printing his work out for me to read and type up in is size is getting out of control.”*

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

Access to learning

Throughout our engagement we have learned that the access to learning materials in a format suitable to vision impaired children as well as appropriate specialist equipment being provided for home learning it really important to the wellbeing and attainment of vision impaired children. Further to this the support provided for parents to enable them to assist their children has been sporadic and mixed. For future planning, a consistent approach to the provision of equipment would be required to ensure that all children had equal access to learning. This would need to be provided at the start of any future emergency, and available to all.

As with the Department for Education equipment grant for vulnerable families which has been provided during the Covid19 pandemic, this provision of equipment has come at a late stage for many children who had already missed out on months of schooling due to lack of equipment.

One parent felt that a standard curriculum for vision impaired children needed to be available. This approach would assist children in the future to have fair access to curriculum and learning, as our findings showed that one child's peers were learning fractions, whilst she was being sent an app on how to identify bird song.

A review of the curriculum for GCSEs and A levels would be a possibility; this review could include more course-based work, and a move away from the over reliance upon exam-based results. For children who have disabilities and may struggle more in exams this would be a good option to ensure that they have equal opportunities to attain.

Communication and Support

Parents demonstrated the lack of continuity of support being provided by schools. Some parents were happy with the support both they and their child received; others felt they had been abandoned and had received little or no support to home school their child. The messages parents received at times were purportedly misleading around being able to send their child to school. A clear approach laid down for all parents and schools which did not allow for interpretation would be useful for those who were unclear as to whether their vision impaired child could attend school. A clear, structured way to contact key personnel at schools would be useful for parents and would assist QTVI's etc with their case load management.

Training on how to use specialist equipment for parents was identified to support parents in home schooling. This would support parents in their confidence of using such equipment, but also most importantly support children to be able to use their equipment in the home. Tailored support for vision impaired children who have missed out of learning would assist in their future learning development.

Further recommendations consisted of using video conferencing to communicate between families and schools. Some schools were using different learning platforms – the use of one accessible platform rolled out across the country would be beneficial for parents and children.

The mental health and wellbeing of families has, as demonstrated in our findings been impacted by the pandemic. Through stronger support networks and training on materials/learning provided by the school, this would alleviate the angst parents felt about not being able to support their child in their home learning.

Access to mental health support for children and young people could be an option for the future as we have found many young vision impaired people have and are experiencing difficulties with their anxiety levels. These anxiety levels have ranged from changes to routine, to social isolation, which vision impaired children are more likely to experience by nature of their disability prior to any lockdown.

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