

Written evidence submitted by Dropzone Youth Projects, Furness Academy, University of Central Lancashire, West Lakes Academy

**Response to Parliamentary Select Committee on the impact of COVID-19 on Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: Call for Evidence**

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**Key Points**

- The Cumbrian coastline was already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and educational isolation prior to COVID-19.
- Many disadvantaged families face digital exclusion (in terms connectivity and access to IT).
- Travel restrictions have impacted on disadvantaged families' ability to access the FSM food voucher scheme.
- Existing health inequalities surrounding inactivity and obesity have been further exacerbated whilst the schools have been closed.
- Children and young people along the Cumbrian coast already face limited aspirational opportunities. Reduced time at school has further limited these opportunities as teachers serve as positive role models for many disadvantaged students.
- Locally tailored solutions designed and delivered by those who know the communities best can provide bespoke, responsive solutions to the challenges that left behind coastal communities face.

**Introduction, Background & Methods**

The following research was carried out by the Centre for Citizenship and Community at the University of Central Lancashire in collaboration with West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum and West Lakes Academy. We brought together key stakeholders working with disadvantaged children and young people in Cumbria to respond to the specific terms of reference below in describing:

- The role of place
- The impact of home learning environments
- The importance of positive role of models
- The value of locally tailored solutions

We hope this response provides evidence to the above terms of reference from a perspective of a number of white 'left behind' coastal communities (Centre for Social Justice, 2013).

### **Background**

Coastal communities in Cumbria are generally industrial or post-industrial communities. The main employers are multinational industries which creates income inequalities between those who work within the sector and those who do not, where affluent neighbourhoods border social housing estates experiencing significant poverty. The geographic positioning of coastal Cumbria leaves communities vulnerable to both real and cultural isolation, resulting in some residents feeling that the area has been 'left behind'. This impacts on the aspirations of children and young people, who have limited opportunities for new experiences, particularly those who have limited access to transport (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019).

### **Methodology**

Evidence presented in this paper has been taken from a larger rapid response paper produced by West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum which highlights the potential impact of the COVID-19 on children and young people in West Cumbria, particularly those in poverty or who are otherwise vulnerable. This rapid response report combined national and local public data with that from both a survey of Cumbrian children and young people and accounts from key stakeholders such as teaching staff and youth workers. The present evidence being submitted has been enhanced by wider consultation with relevant parties throughout Cumbria.

### **Evidence**

The COVID-19 outbreak is already exacerbating the existing challenges for families experiencing poverty on the Cumbrian coast, with child poverty in some communities being as high as 41% (End Child Poverty, 2019). Research has highlighted the protective and vulnerability factors faced by disadvantaged students (Cullen et al., 2018). Many protective factors have been removed due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures and many of the vulnerability factors have been amplified. Furthermore, many families previously on the edge have now tipped into poverty. Along the

Cumbrian coast there has been an increase in Universal Credit application between 81%-62% [ONS, 2020]. This is lower than other parts of the county, but, given the existing poverty, significantly impacts on these communities. This will lead to an increase in the number of pupils who are eligible for pupil premium, putting additional strain on coastal schools' capacity when they were already struggling.

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities and widen the attainment gap that already exists (Education Policy Institute, 2000).

## **The Role of Place**

### **Digital Exclusion**

Access to internet is a challenge facing Cumbria, disproportionality affecting families in poverty. This is particularly important when education is being delivered virtually. This form of teaching assumes that all children and young people have access to adequate IT equipment at home, and accounts from schools and community groups reveals this is simply not the case for many families in West Cumbria. For example, a survey of 171 year ten pupils in one academy showed that only 27.5% had access to IT in their homes at the start of the crisis. Throughout the lockdown period, Cumbria County Council's Education Tactical Co-ordination Group (a sub-group of the Multi-Agency Strategic Co-ordination Group) responded to the DfE's scheme to provide free laptops, iPads and 4G routers to households of disadvantaged children in Year 10, as well as vulnerable children and care leavers. However, account from schools, social workers and families suggest that the allocation to Cumbria is falling short of demand. Schools have provided accounts of delivering physical materials to families who lack the IT resources required for virtual learning, but this does not mitigate the inequalities that are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown.

Access to equipment has not been the only challenge facing families. Accessing quality, reliable broadband in a rural area remains an additional debilitating factor. The Children's Commissioner's vulnerability data reveals that children in Cumbria are in the fifth most vulnerable category for having poor broadband access (Children's Commissioner, 2020), leaving many children vulnerable to digital isolation (Almann, 2020). These estimates are somewhat confirmed by a survey of over 1,000 young people in West Cumbria, which revealed that 43.7% of young people do not have a reliable access to the internet, with roughly 40% of these people saying that their internet connection has been notably worse during the pandemic.

### **Rurality**

The national voucher scheme was welcomed by families across West Cumbria; however, its availability was intermittent. The voucher scheme was only applicable to larger shops operating in town centres, this created gaps in rural areas due to more local shops, such as the Co-Op, not being in the scheme and a being lack of local available alternative. Consequently, in some cases, this forced families to travel to shops in town centres, arguably risking the spread of the virus. Access to public transport, particularly in rural communities, was also compromised during the lockdown, which further limited family's ability to access to voucher scheme.

## **Home Learning Environment**

### **Lifestyle and Routine**

Teachers have expressed concerns about the lack of understanding of the importance of routine amongst some families. These concerns have been echoed and evidenced by youth workers who provide accounts of young people staying up all night on social media or gaming and sleeping in the day. Young people who have been involved in a longitudinal study at UCLan have also reported disturbed sleep, mainly due to social media usage.

Furthermore, accounts from practitioners have highlighted that existing challenges experienced by families in poor or cramped living conditions have been exacerbated, with large families struggling for space. Young people have described having to care for young siblings as consuming their school time, and also causing considerable noise and other forms of distraction.

Survey data revealed many students that the workload being given by schools was higher than usual and it was hard to cope with, especially with special circumstances due to the pandemic such as having to look after younger siblings. There were also concerns of students with ADHD who struggled to focus by themselves, and some who struggled to teach themselves the content and saying that video lessons would be better.

During lockdown many families facing financial hardship were not able to feed their children fresh, healthy food. This accompanied by many young people becoming increasingly inactive has resulted in anecdotal evidence from teachers demonstrating that many students are returning to school with weight gain, and in some cases, mobility challenges. This is particularly worrying for students in left-behind coastal communities, with child obesity already above the national average. For example, in Barrow-in-Furness and Copeland around 40% of 10-11 year olds are overweight (Cumbria Intelligence Observatory, 2020).

### Virtual Learning

Despite the challenges associated with connectivity stated above, many students have attempted to access virtual learning. Schools around the account have engaged in video teaching in varying degrees, and with varying success. Methods in which this has been attempted include Google Classroom and Zoom.

Alternative provision provides an essential service to many left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Dropzone Youth Projects provides alternative provision to students unable to access mainstream education, all of whom fit into this 'left behind' category. This teaching was delivered through Zoom with some students responding well (*"I like that I can do lessons whilst at home. I also get more work done as there are less distractions than there would be in the classroom"*), and others less so (*"I don't like virtual learning, I prefer pen and paper. Not everyone has the facilities to be able to download and print work off. I don't engage in any Zoom lessons but will do work with pen and paper if it's printed and delivered for me."*). The key advantages of this form of learning were cited to be accessibility and less distractions. Some of the limitations of virtual learning were felt to be similar, in accessibility and fewer distractions. Overall, these students favoured face to face learning for a number of reasons, with one of those reasons being the value of face to face interaction with teacher.

### Positive Role Models:

Teachers have expressed concern that some of the more vulnerable students don't have the family and support networks to develop these skills, meaning the gap in learning is likely to increase. There are also concerns that some students' basic needs are not being met. Teachers and students themselves have described their concerns about the impact of distance learning (in whatever form it may be). This style of learning deprives students of the opportunity to ask questions and ask for clarity, and also removes opportunities for explorative discussions about the subject matter. Furthermore, it is well documented nationally that for some students, schools can be the only safe place to go, and are the only time they encounter positive, supportive role models (The Guardian Tue 14 Apr 2020). Teachers and those within the local authority have expressed concern about this on a local level. Children and young people along the Cumbrian coast already face limited opportunities to promote their aspirations. Reduced time at school has further limited these opportunities as teachers serve as positive role models for many disadvantaged children and young people.

### **The Value of Locally Tailored Solutions**

Many of the challenges facing white coastal communities are place based, as are the solutions. Not only schools, but also community centres, charities and local business have shown remarkable resilience in responding with innovative schemes to serve the needs of children and young people in Cumbria during the first stage of lockdown. This section provides just a small summary of these responses.

#### **West Lakes Academy: Resource Hubs in the Community**

*“We surveyed our students about their learning experiences so far and asked them various questions about learning, their feelings and any barriers they have to their learning. It was clear from this that students needed more resources to complete home learning. We had already sent our disadvantaged students packs of resources, but it was clear they needed a sustainable structure to ensure this barrier did not remain. We had to think carefully about how we surveyed our disadvantaged students as the normal communication channels often don’t elicit responses from our families. Using our pupil premium mentor, who has developed exceptional relationships with our families, meant that we could survey via text messages to understand the needs of our families. Due to the restrictions in place and our understanding of transport constraints for our families, we knew we needed to outreach our academy and place hubs in our communities. Hubs have been positioned across our catchment and take up has been huge. We have already ‘topped’ these up three times in two weeks.”*

Melissa Relph, Vice Principal

#### **Dropzone Youth Projects: Bringing Alternative Educational Provision into the Home**

*“The impact of Covid-19 has been enormous, their secondary education abruptly stopped and unless the young person was open to Children’s Services or subject to an EHCP we stopped being paid for our service. Our young people are at the centre of everything we do so we couldn’t just stop, we had to keep supporting so our young people. Our provision moved to remote and virtual provision, still supporting 20 young people. Many of our young people don’t have phones, laptops or internet so we adapted our learning provision to each individual. Some receive work packs pushed through the doors, some are taking this period of time to totally disengage so we’re not seeing them and some don’t have the equipment. We have had two really concerning safeguarding issues, both over weekends so staff are working above and beyond what they are paid to do (as we have no crisis or mental health support services in place in Barrow during these times).”* Cath Corkill, Project Manager,

Dropzone Youth Projects

### **Furness Academy: Fighting Food Insecurity**

*“At Furness Academy our students live locally, we know their families and 409 (43%) out of the 1017 have free school meals, the largest percentage in Cumbria. Many others come from families who are on the financial edge, and when school was open it offered free “magic” breakfasts. Staff were concerned that these students didn’t go hungry during lockdown, so had already begun conversations with local producers before the national scheme was announced. When it was, two catering team staff worked intensively helping 236 families access National Food vouchers, including discretely delivering 15 to our hardest to reach families. In addition, staff continue to volunteer to assemble and deliver 240 breakfast packs (cereal, jam, bagels, baked beans and milk vouchers) every fortnight along with simple meal recipe cards. They are planning to continue through the summer holidays.” Hilary Ellam, Trustee Furness Education Trust*

### **Recommendations**

Educational practitioners are expressing grave concerns regarding the widening of the education gap. It is well documented that children from middle-class families generally perform better academically than families experiencing poverty ([Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012](#)). In Britain, the educational attainment gap between ‘disadvantaged’ 16-year-old pupils and their middle-class peers at the end of secondary school is currently 22.6 months, despite considerable policy and practice focus ([Education Policy Institute, 2019](#)). Furthermore, the anticipated economic downturn will lead to a significant increase in children who are considered disadvantaged. This means that fewer children will be able to access the resources needed to thrive academically and will also place financial pressures on the Government’s Pupil Premium funding allocation. In view of this, we make the following recommendations.

- 1. Educate teachers how to effectively engage with disadvantage families:** There are examples across the county providing best practice for innovative engagement with disadvantaged families, along with a wealth of evidence-based papers (for example, [Wilson, 2019](#)). An in-depth review of these practices, along with a network providing opportunities for staff to share their experiences, would help to disseminate and develop engagement strategies throughout the county. Examples of best practice in Cumbria include:

- a. *Actively engage with their disadvantaged families by using mechanisms that work:*  
This involves trusted adults in the community working alongside schools, developing communication methods that disadvantage families engage with.
  - b. *Challenge teachers' assumptions about the experience of disadvantaged families:*  
Provide teaching and pastoral staff with the time to build relationships with families, learning about their experience and understand their needs. Through this relationship all parties can work to remove each and every barrier faced by the families.
  - c. *Challenge negative perceptions of what education and schools mean to disadvantaged families by placing non-threatening outreach strands in to the community:* These can take the form of hubs, trusted adults, signposting of support but also supporting the families to access this support, raising expectations of parents and share parenting tips on how parents can engage in learning.
  - d. Through such learning, the DfE can promote a culture of support in schools, supporting families re-connect with education and demonstrate this through added weight of pastoral support within the OFSTED inspection framework.
- 2. Review the role of schools within the communities they serve:** All schools should be encouraged to strengthen home school relationships, by working in partnership with the communities, local authorities and third sector organisation in their catchment areas, so together they can support neighbourhoods experiencing significant poverty. This community embedded approach will ensure that the needs and potential attainment of all children and young people are met, and that those who are vulnerable to 'falling through the net' are supported. The DfE should support this by reviewing the role of schools within their communities and setting up an Innovation Fund to catalogue, develop and disseminate the best practice emerging from the lockdown experience.
- 3. Commission a systematic review of the innovative use of technology during lockdown:** This will provide guidance to enable teachers at schools to provide a high standard of education within the home, which could be through videos (Loom, YouTube) and interactive discursive sessions through Google Classroom. Within this, mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that all students have access to technology and broadband. Furthermore, exploratory work to identify strategy to work with parents to develop both their parenting and IT skills to enable them to better engage in their children's education is recommended.

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