

Written evidence submitted by Great Minds Together

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

Executive Summary

- Great Minds Together is a community interest company supporting families, schools and services where there is a child with special educational needs and disabilities and/or social, emotional and mental health needs, in order to promote better outcomes. Great Minds Together allocate a mentor (or a number of mentor's for complex cases) to the family to act as a central point of co-ordination as well as providing a holistic model of support both emotionally and practically.
- Great Minds Together are submitting evidence because we work with many families and a number of schools and local authorities and have done throughout the lockdown period. We launched our COVID-19 virtual support programme on 18th March 2020 which operated across 24 local authorities with a volunteer initiative of 148 supporting a total (so far) of 532 families. We have a depth of understanding from a range of perspectives on how the implementation of the critical workers policy is being applied across the country and of the impact that COVID-19 has had on education and children's services.
- We aim to submit evidence on every point on the terms of reference in our submission.

Evidence

1. Out of the 48 schools we worked with over the course of the lockdown period, 0 reported feeling supported to remain open for children of critical workers. The overall feedback is that schools did not feel confident in what they were providing due to the conflicted information they were receiving on a daily basis, many times more than one guidance report that conflicted the previous one. In addition, the guidance was largely open to interpretation, meaning every school operated differently.
2. Out of 532 families supported by our virtual support programme 286 parents/carers reported that they could not access provision for their child. 100% of these children were in the 'vulnerable' category. 98 of these parents/carers were classed as critical workers (Key workers).
3. There is clear evidence that children's services were severely decapacitated during COVID-19. Out of 532 of the families we worked with on our virtual support programme, 203 had an allocated social worker. From the period 23rd March 2020 through to 3rd June 2020 none of these families had a visit from a social worker, even where there were safeguarding concerns. This was as a result of lockdown rules and reduced capacity within the workforce. As many were working from home, communication with families was reliant on telephone and email. In a large number of cases when they made contact with their social worker, or where we did on their behalf, an efficient response was hard to achieve. This meant that centralised teams were over-run by enquiries and some families slipped through the net completely. After lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020 Great Minds Together received 46 national self-referrals from families within a 48 hour period as a result of withdrawal of services.
4. There was a distinct lack of understanding regarding the issue of technology to vulnerable children or families in need. The guidance was unclear at times as to whether the social worker or school were responsible for the issuing of laptops or tablets. As a result of this lack of clarity, we sourced 17 laptops/MacBook's/tablets for vulnerable children, and many local communities were fund raising as a result of vulnerable children not receiving what they needed to complete their schoolwork. We posted 397 resource packs (focussing on growth mindset and social, emotional wellbeing) to families that did not have a printer or could not afford ink. There was no evidence of alternative methods of

engagement for children and young people who were not able to or willing to engage in online learning.

5. Where children aged 2 and 3 are due to transition to school in September, lockdown and the closure of their nurseries has had a significant impact on their social communication skills. The impact on their developmental delay as a result of this closure remains to be recognised. When nurseries were allowed to re-open, as this was discretionary, not clear and only 'guidance', many did not re-open. This has meant that children have been out of early years education for a total of 6 months by September 2020. There is already a concern about young children being 'school ready'. This will now have an impact on their separation anxiety, attachment and we may see some trauma related behaviours as a result of this lack of engagement in an early year's setting. Schools will need significant support in transitioning this year's intake of nursery and reception children. It is very likely that these children will be transitioned into school towards the end of September, which means many critical workers will be struggling for childcare. You cannot use your 30 hour childcare voucher across two settings at present, so where there is a childcare need for critical workers, this will have to be self-funded as there is currently no additional support from Government on this issue so impacts the financial security for many families.
6. The effect of cancelling formal exams, specifically for young people with special, educational needs and disabilities and/or social, emotional and mental health needs was immediately evident. In total Great Minds Together support 697 families across the UK (at the time of this submission) which includes the families we were supporting prior to the pandemic. Out of these families, 121 have a child that was in year 11 or 13 during COVID-19. There is no pathway at present available for these young people, and guidance is confusing. We have made contact with a total of 23 colleges and/or apprenticeship providers, all of whom advise they are unsure of the plan for September 2020 (as of 20th July 2020) where the young person has not already achieved a place prior to COVID19 (this equates to 100% of our young people). Many, if not all of the young people in these year groups that we work with suffer with low self-esteem, social anxiety and/or low mood and poor mental health. Not being able to plan for their future is affecting their motivation and engagement with most parents reporting that their teenagers are spending their days in bed, whilst staying up all night online. This in turn increases risk on social media and the potential for grooming and anti-social behaviour. There is also a significant financial impact for low income families where they cannot demonstrate that their child is in education, training or employment. Some pupils have not been given a calculated grade at all. Where they have not been able to demonstrate a level of attainment in the previous year, schools are not willing to allocate any form of grade. Although the young person has the opportunity to appeal, or sit an exam next year, this is not reflective of what they would be able to achieve now, and there is no support in place for them to be able to achieve this, notwithstanding the impact on their self-confidence.
7. There has been no consistency of support for families during closures. The guidance was unclear and contradictory meaning schools had to use their own interpretation. Schools in the South seemed to operate extremely differently than those in the North. There seemed to be high expectation in the South of online learning, and this being looked at and marked by teachers and feedback given, however in the North there were many schools that have not made any contact at all with children that are vulnerable. The interpretation of the word vulnerable has also played a part in misunderstandings. Where there are children in need or on child protection, they are categorised as vulnerable. However, the Government also categorised children with EHC plans as vulnerable, which has a completely different meaning. This has caused much upset with parents of children with SEND and SEMH needs. In a large number of cases, specifically in the North, there was no online learning at all expected or overseen by a school. At one school in Manchester, parents were advised not to worry about their child doing any work throughout the lockdown period as it wouldn't be marked and there would be a catch up programme anyway, this particular school did not post any work online or carry out any online lessons at all. The postcode lottery was particularly evident during COVID-19, for example: two primary schools in Manchester, less than two miles apart, one school brought in early years for transition days to meet their teachers, brought back year one children and year six children as well as providing online work that was marked directly by teachers, whereas the other school provided no transition support for early years, did not open to any other year groups other than year

six despite only supporting 16 keyworker children, not allowing space for other keyworkers, the same school did not provide any online learning throughout the lockdown period.

8. The financial implications for providers have been significant. There has been a positive response from grant funders who acted quickly and were able to distribute funds efficiently that they were allocated as part of the COVID-19 response fund. However, the response fund allocated was not enough to meet the need, for example, The Youth Endowment Fund were allocated £6.5 million, yet there were £58 million pounds worth of applications. Many charities and providers have declared crisis point and are at significant risk of permanent closure as a result of there not being enough funding distributed to support the closures. The financial implications of pupils and families was overall positive, the main implication to pupils and families was reduction in services which in turn affected their emotional wellbeing, specifically the change in legislation from 'Absolute Duty' to 'Reasonable Endeavours'.
9. Due to a celebrity campaigner, disadvantaged groups are now able to receive free school meals over the summer holidays, and this has resulted in a wider recognition of the severe need for many families living in poverty in our country. In terms of a longer-term impact for children with special educational needs and disabilities, the gap that was already evident in terms of attainment and support available to them has seemingly become much wider. All children and young people's education were suddenly disrupted by COVID-19, however this has highlighted that an already failing system was not equipped to protect the most vulnerable.
10. The education and social care system need significant focus. There needs to be an allocation of funding in both of these sectors that matches the need. Currently there is a substantial shortfall, and this has resulted in the most catastrophic impact on the most vulnerable in our society. In addition to this, there needs to be a SEND Commissioner, which is independent from the Government that will oversee, hold to account but most importantly support these sectors with a hands-on model. By appointing an independent SEND Commissioner, that specialises in supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and/or social, emotional and mental health needs, it will ensure that there is specific focus on this area of need. The SEND Commissioner will be responsible for bringing community organisations, charities and parents together in order to provide a bonded supportive framework to support families, schools and services. What has been most evident during COVID-19 is that this country cannot cope without the support of independent organisations and the private sector, yet for many years the third sector, private sector and the public sector have all operated separately and in a dis-jointed way. By uniting these sectors, you will see consistency, innovative ideas and access to unlimited resources that will be overseen by one independent body. The SEND Commissioner will be able to highlight good practice and work towards ensuring a consistent approach to education and social care for the children, young people and families. Should we suffer at the hands of a further pandemic, The SEND Commissioner would be solely responsible for ensuring accountability and providing support at a grass roots level.

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