

Written evidence submitted by Peak Special School

Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services.

Parliamentary Select Committee

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Organisation Introduction

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Peak School
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We are a small, nursery to nineteen, academy run Special School in North West Derbyshire. We cater for children and young adults with a whole range of needs, particularly those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), communication difficulties, and those with extremely challenging behaviour linked to their associated learning difficulties.

Most pupils at Peak work outside the National Curriculum and we are proud to offer an individualised curriculum which is built around our four key areas:

- Physical and Movement
- Emotional and Expressive Arts
- Accessing the World and Communication
- Knowledge and Know-how

We have a number of specialist on-site facilities and services:

- Hydrotherapy Pool
- Sensory Rooms and Sensory Garden
- Fully equipped kitchen/catering learning environment for our post-16 pupils.
- On site Nurse, Physiotherapist and Speech and Language Therapists

Our location in North West Derbyshire, on the edge of the Peak District, means we are also accessible for pupils who may live in Cheshire, Stockport, Tameside (Greater Manchester) and also Sheffield.

We are currently Ofsted rated 'Good'—with 'Outstanding' for Behaviour and Welfare—and we are working hard to ensure we achieve outstanding results in our next inspection.

Reason for submitting evidence

The lockdown of 2020 has exposed the weaknesses in the EHCP system and polarised the education system further between mainstream and Special Needs Schools.

The children's services, that form the EHCP, are pushed to absolute limits in normal circumstances. The additional pressure created by lockdown has highlighted how these systems need to become better integrated to create a positive outcome for SEND children, young adults and their families.

The pressure on parent carers has been immense, with many parent carers describing their situation as 'beyond exhausted' and 'unable to access any support'.

The services have to come together more effectively to prevent further health crises and the detrimental financial impact this will bring.

Investment in Special Schools and Social Care will create a good framework for the future to ensure positive educational, health and social well-being outcomes, for individuals and their families through generations.

Parent carers make a daily silent sacrifice, this work should be recognised with well structured and funded support systems.

Supporting Evidence

Evidence would demonstrate that support was not fully accessible from key services, such as Social Care for all children with an EHC plan. Therefore, leaving vulnerable children and their parent carers isolated and mentally and emotionally pushed to the limits of capacity to provide adequate care. Respite for these critical workers is essential. The limits on Social Care leaves education as the main support for vulnerable families.

Social Care has a limited budget with tight assessment criteria so many children are refused funding for different levels of support.

Respite services have been extremely limited throughout lockdown and many respite services continue to be unavailable or limited. These services are unable to confirm when the services will be safely available to SEND children and young adults.

Government advice is for schools to close for the summer holidays. At present, schools are the only consistent, individual risk assessed, safe support for SEND children and young adults. Help and support is needed for parent carers who are already exhausted.

Government advice on school opening in September doesn't seem to consider the medical risk to the medically vulnerable children now or during a future pandemic or regional lockdown. The risk to these children is a matter of life and death.

Returning to school in September will bring plans to address trauma issues for SEND children and young adults due to the mental, emotional and physical impacts of the recent lockdown. These plans for addressing the well-being issues will be provided with no additional support on already stretched resources in Special Schools.

Investment is required now, and in the future, to support parent carers in order to prevent a catastrophic effect on mental health and social care systems, which could potentially cost up to £200,000 per child per year due to parent carers being unable to cope, and SEND children and young adults being placed in state care.

Restrictions and limitations of schools are around space at school to allow for the social distancing of children that don't understand social distancing. Also, staffing levels to ensure safe social distancing and ratio care for our pupils.

Social Care and school systems are already so stretched they have nothing beyond day to day running. Lockdown has demonstrated the limitations and downfalls, therefore highlighting that nothing can be put in place to create the necessary support at this time, over the school holidays or beyond.

Given the uncertainty of the future, and the increasing need in the SEND community how do we access extra funding in order to improve outcomes? Lockdown has exposed the weaknesses in the EHCP system and polarised the education system further, this two-tiered system prioritises mainstream over Special Needs education.

The measurable system used by Special Needs Schools, shows progression through the EHCP, this is not currently considered when assessing children of school age and the importance of their education.

The £1 billion pot for 'catch-up' and COVID-19 grants were not accessible to Special Needs Schools, almost creating a punishment for being effectively lead and well managed regardless of additional needs of the SEND children and young adults at the Special Schools.

Why is more financial value being attributed to mainstream schools over Special Needs Schools? This could be perceived as unintentionally promoting disability discrimination.

Parents are mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted.

Parent carers have been working continuously 24 hours per day, 7 days per week through the whole of lockdown and will continue to do so throughout the school holidays with limited or no respite. If parent carers access carers allowance their hourly rate as carers is £0.40, this is not parenting, it is full time care, no breaks, meeting the medical, educational and social care needs of a vulnerable child or young adult. Some parent carers have more than one vulnerable child.

Parent carers are the undervalued key workers making a silent sacrifice within a forgotten sector.

Parent carers should get recognition/parity as 'critical workers' just like residential carers.

Special Schools and Social Care should be supported to provide respite when no other services are available as parent carers need respite breaks. Resources should be made available so a safe environment can be established, thus enabling continuity in provision inline with the basic level of need in EHC plans.

Risk assessments at the start of lockdown were to determine which children would be able to access school support, due to limited resources. The number of children had to increase over lockdown, without any further resources available, due to limited support from social care and parent carers being exhausted and in desperate need of respite.

As staff aren't contracted to work over the summer, parent carers can't access the respite they need. Additional support from school would be at a cost of £100 per day, to parent carers, as there is no extra funding available from the Government to actively support SEND children and young adults over the school holidays and in the future if there is a further lockdown.

The mental health effects on SEND children and young adults is overtly apparent. The various levels of understanding amongst this group of vulnerable children means even a slight change in routine causes distress which affects mental, emotional and physical health, and impacts their families who are unable to access respite care.

Government advice for schools to exercise 'reasonable endeavours' to open in relation to EHC plans, underestimated the damaging impact on family wellbeing. This affected

vulnerable children who need the multi-agency support on a regular basis that is provided through school, in order maintain or improve their measured levels of abilities, accessed through detailed advice and guidance from the EHC plan.

This change in law through the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to the EHC plan, has effectively made the EHC plan null and void, abandoning SEND children and young adults and leaving caring special schools desperately trying to support families and picking up the slack for other support services that are grossly underfunded.

For many, Covid-19 lockdown has dismantled main support systems and left family units buckling due to meeting care, education and social care needs 24/7, without acceptable breaks or respite.

Contingency planning

- Ensure essential and appropriate funding for Special Schools to enable extra classroom space for SEND children and young adults, so they are safe even with their inability to socially distance due to their condition or need.
- Countrywide flexible support payments for parent carers.
- Parent carers need recognition as key workers, who are treated as such, with financial support and appropriate respite care to reflect this.
- Schools and social care have to be promoted as the very few safe places that parent carers can openly ask for help and support, due to their fear of judgement and understanding. This is constantly needed especially when parent carers are struggling with exhaustion, physically, mentally and emotionally due to constant care needs being addressed without breaks or respite, such as during Covid-19 lockdown. Lockdown intensifies isolation.
- Schools and Social Care need additional funding and resources to provide the essential respite that is sustainable for the provider and has a positive impact on the family unit. This will ensure all parties involved with care needs can work effectively together.
- Basic entitlement should be a consistent and manageable level of respite provided by school and social care, that is sustainable across the services, ensuring the well-being of the parent carer as a priority.
- Recognition that Social Care and schools are there for education and support and should be funded with this in mind.
- Future EHCP planning should include respite care as a necessary part of planning support for SEND children and young adults and the connected family units. This support should be a priority in times of crisis.

Peak Special School have tried to create the change they so desperately need to see in the SEND community, with the limited resources that have been available and the reduced staffing measures within education and Social Care.

Fundraising and emergency home equipment is being donated by the community, as Special Schools seem to have been overlooked when much needed 'catch up' resources have been allocated by the Government.

Special Schools are the forgotten sector.

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