

## Written evidence submitted by Family fund

### House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry on the impact of COVID-19

#### About our Organisation

Family Fund is the UK's largest charity providing grants for families on low incomes raising disabled or seriously ill children and young people. Last year we provided over 100,000 Grants and services worth over £35 million to families.

We strongly believe that all families raising disabled or seriously ill children and young people should have access to the same opportunities as others. Our support is focused on helping to improve their quality of life, realise their rights, and remove some of the barriers they face.

With grant funding from the four UK governments, trusts and foundations, private donations, and gifted income from our trading subsidiary, Family Fund Business Services, we provide a wide range of items, such as essential kitchen appliances, much-needed family breaks, computers and tablets, and more. You can find out more by visiting [www.familyfund.org.uk](http://www.familyfund.org.uk)

#### Background to our research

This response draws upon Family Fund's current UK-wide research to establish the short and longer term impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on families we support.

The research aims were:

- To understand how the Covid-19 outbreak is affecting families raising disabled or seriously ill children in the UK
- To understand the immediate concerns and needs of families raising disabled or seriously ill children in UK resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak.

Family Fund conducted two online surveys and a series of in-depth interviews with families we support. Survey one (27 March) saw 1,575 responses from England. Our second survey was undertaken on 30 April 2020, five weeks after school closures. We received 2,531 UK responses including 2,197 from England.

#### Call for evidence: The impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services

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

Our research showed that while families are caring for their disabled or seriously ill child day and night, support from children's services decreased significantly. After five weeks of being in lockdown, only one in ten families [11%] said their disabled or seriously ill children were still accessing their regular nursery, school or college place. Traditionally, many children's services are delivered within the school environment which also impacts on the ability to deliver these services.

*"Both my disabled children receive a lot of support from school: speech therapy, physio, communication and so on"*

Almost half [48%] reported an immediate decrease in the formal support they received due to the outbreak. By the end of April almost two thirds of families in England [64%] said formal support had declined since lockdown began and social distancing measures were put in place.

The main types of support they were no longer receiving were educational psychologists [77%], occupational therapy [77%], respite [77%], speech and language therapy [76%], physiotherapy [75%], and audiology / ophthalmology [76%]. Worryingly, at a time when children reported higher than normal levels of anxiety, vital services like psychology and CAMHS have been significantly reduced.

Over half of families [53%] told us that since the outbreak they were no longer receiving support from carers for personal care, medical needs and additional respite.

*“School closures means I am looking after all his needs 24/7 with no break... As well as my other children. He will have no respite. He cannot attend any therapies or appointments so worried this will affect his health long term.”*

The reduction of formal support has occurred alongside a huge reduction in informal support from friends, family and local community. Over two thirds [69%] saw a reduction in informal support such as respite [82%], play and recreational activities. Over half lost informal support for household tasks such as gardening, housework and cooking. At a time when families face a significant amount of pressure over half [57%] said they had lost valuable emotional support.

### **3.The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to: Children’s early development**

Of the families we surveyed in England 9% accessed early years support, with over half (55%) having an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan prior to lockdown.

Post-lockdown, only 10% continued to attend their early years setting. Reasons given were ‘shielding’ their disabled or seriously ill children, not being offered a place, or preferring to/being advised to care for their child at home. This will have impacted on the ability to follow any tailored support and activity specific to a child’s development outlined in their EHC plan.

Over two thirds (67%) of families were supported to continue their child’s early education at home. Support was provided in the form of emails (28%), online / paper resources (24%) and telephone or video calls (21%). Digital Technology, such as a laptop or tablet, was provided to 5% of families to help access education and resources from home.

Over a third [37%] felt support was acceptable, [36%] felt support was very good or good and 27% of families felt support from their Early Years provider was poor.

Most families (79%) said additional support or resource to aid their child’s development at home was needed including digital technology, accessories such as printers and ink, worksheets and stationary.

### **5. Support for pupils and families during closures, including:**

#### ***a) The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning***

Prior to the closures caused by Covid-19, 96% of children were accessing nursery, school or college. Five weeks into lockdown, just 11% continued to access school support.

Of those disabled or seriously ill children still attending, only two in five were in education full-time [42%], with the remaining children accessing a variety of timetables over the week. Families had a variety of reasons for not accessing school places: preferring to care for their disabled or seriously ill children at home [28%], shielding [26%], and being advised to keep their disabled or seriously ill children at home [24%].

Some families reported some mixed messaging from schools as to whether their child should attend, even if they had an EHC plan.

*“The head closed the school even though my son has an EHCP”*

*“School closed due to staffing issues and other school had limited places due to staffing”*

Despite a large number of children not currently in education, families were fairly positive about the quality of support offered by education providers. More than two in five families [45%] rated support offered as ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

*“Due to my son’s school remaining open they have sent the main students home... All supported with three video conferences a day and homework packs. Can’t fault them at all’.*

The majority of families [86%] received support with home learning including: online and paper resources [48%], support via email [37%], support via telephone or video call [35%] and one-to-one telephone or video calls for their children [25%]. To access online support, 7% of families were allocated digital technology. Families also reported support from schools had helped their general wellbeing.

*“The SEN school are good. Phoning every other day to see how we are, gave homework pack, speak to my son . . . I think it’s really good that school are phoning to see how the children are. It’s really good for me and husband to get support during these hard times. It’s horrific. You realise how much the teachers do and appreciate it. She has given me her direct email address and phone number.”*

A further third of families [34%] said support offered was acceptable. Areas of improvement focused around more contact, access to digital devices and making work and activities appropriate/accessible for disabled or seriously ill children.

While the majority received some support, 14% of families said they had not received any support since their child/ren had been at home:

*“No support from the school. I am having to print work off and do it at home with him, school will not supply workpacks etc, have already discussed this with head teacher.”*

Digital skills and the ability to access homework is an issue for parents. Over half [54%] of families stated they needed additional help for a tablet, computer or laptop to access schoolwork. 16% of families also felt they needed support to educate their child/ren at home.

*“The whole school structure work is set on the ‘show me my homework’ app but without the support and simplifying of work from teachers it’s caused anxiety and melt down.”*

## **b) Children’s and young people’s mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**

The Covid-19 outbreak had an immediate effect on families’ health and wellbeing. The majority [94%] said the outbreak had negatively affected their disabled or seriously ill children’s health and wellbeing, an increase of 6% since the start of lockdown. In particular, they reported worries about their child’s behaviour and emotions [89%], and mental wellbeing [82%]. This included increased anxiety and mood swings, becoming upset and escalating challenging behaviour.

*“My little boy who is disabled has huge anxiety problems and doesn’t understand the change in routine. He is suffering and we don’t know how to help him. We’ve seen a huge increase in his aggressive behaviour and lashing out. It’s a struggle to keep his siblings safe.”*

*“He is restless and full of energy which we cannot release. He is lonely and bored which in turn frustrates him. We are trying our best but his behaviour is regressing rapidly. He screams and hits out for the majority of the day regardless of the effort I put in to ensure he is entertained. We’re at a complete loss of what to do.”*

Families said managing their disabled or seriously ill children’s emotions and behaviour was one of their main fears. This has a huge effect on the wellbeing of families already facing a lack of formal and informal emotional support.

*“Mental health is suffering for me and my children. We are isolated my family can’t help me physically only on the phone. I have no car and live alone with my children in a small village. My children are autistic and family usually help me with dealing with them day-to-day”.*

## 6. The financial implications of closures for families

At Family Fund we support the most vulnerable families and those on low incomes. We know these families have few safety nets when faced with additional costs.

Families reported increasing costs in food [76%] and energy [63%], exacerbated as children spent more time at home since school closures. A third [30%] of families said they struggled to afford food, with a quarter missing a meal in order to feed their child/ren.

*"We are unable to get any Government help because he has been working less than a year. We are about a £1,000 a month short and no way of getting any help. This includes paying our rent. Our landlord has not offered any months free either. It's going to be a struggle to put food on the table."*

On top of additional costs half of families surveyed [50%] saw their income fall since lockdown began. For many, this resulted from loss of employment or giving up work to look after and care for their disabled or seriously ill children.

*"We are now in zero contracts as were self-employed and are already on universal credit. We now have nothing and two disabled children at home. It's awful, we need help."*

Many families do not have savings to cope with reductions and additional costs. Our research found that at the start of lockdown 65% had no savings at all, increasing to 72% after five weeks.

This growing financial struggle is further evidenced by a quarter of families [25%] falling behind on bills and credit commitments. These rapid declines in income and extra costs come on top of longer-term reductions in incomes. Findings from our recent Family Survey showed two in five families [42%] had already experienced a reduction in household income in 2019.

## 7. 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)

Three fifths of the families [60%] were eligible for free school meals. Of these, a quarter [26%] did not receive support to access free school meals, vouchers or food parcels. This impacts directly on those families already facing the additional costs of raising a disabled child, who are often on the lowest incomes as previously highlighted.

Longer term, disabled children may be at risk of missing more education than their peers. Our findings show a mixed picture on whether parent carers would send their disabled or seriously ill children back to school before the summer. Two fifths of families [41%] said they would be unlikely to send their disabled or seriously ill children back to nursery, school or college before the summer.

For those families saying they would be unlikely to do so, the main reasons include considering it unsafe for their children to attend, wanting to protect other members of their household from Covid-19 and the impact that going back for a short period of time would have on their disabled or seriously ill children's wellbeing.

A quarter of families [26%] reported shielding as a reason for not attending school. This differs from the 16% added to the 'shielded patients list' and implies families have serious concerns about their child's health should they catch Covid-19. This may impact on their decision to access formal education as soon as they are able. These children could be absent from school for some time.

Planning for return to school for parents of children with SEND, particularly those with the most complex needs requires consideration and greater understanding. To influence attitudes more information needs to

be shared with families on how their children will be catered for and kept safe within the school environment.

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

The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the families we support. As part of the emergency response to Covid-19, Family Fund received additional funding of £10 million from the Department for Education in May, in recognition of this impact. This will provide thousands more grants for families on low incomes raising disabled or seriously ill children in England this year. Families can apply for grants to help access online learning and safe and sensory play currently missing from their everyday curriculum. In the case of a future national emergency, a similar grants programme is essential to support the most vulnerable children and families over a period of time.

### Access to Children's Services:

A lack of formal and informal support from children's services has had a huge effect on families. To improve support, families recommended returning to normal provision and options for alternative access to services and access to some of their closest support networks.

**We recommend families** continue to have access to vital formal services and therapies they have assessed to receive such as Occupational Therapies, Psychology, and CAHMS support. Alternative methods such as online or telephone support should be offered when face to face is not possible. The sector needs to ensure families have information on how to access support to ensure they can weather the physical and emotional impact of the crisis.

**We recommend families** continue to have access to respite support from carers and personal assistants. The pressure of 24 hour care has led to additional stress for families. Care providers have begun to develop services which observe social distancing rules such as support outdoors and booking systems for respite facilities. Examples of good alternative models of support need to be shared with providers to ensure safe care and support services can continue for those assessed to receive it.

**We recommend families** are able to retain a small network or 'bubble' of support around their families where it is safe to ensure they retain some of the physical and emotional support to enable them to get through any similar crisis in future. Additional guidance/express permission will be needed from Government, similar to the 'leaving home guidance' for those with health conditions during the Covid-19 outbreak.

### Access to Financial support

Families told us it was crucial to have support to buy items which help educate and entertain their disabled or seriously ill children whilst at home. More than half of our families felt that information about grants available to them would be helpful to support through this national emergency. Parents highest priority were tablets, computers and laptops outdoor play and leisure equipment sensory toys and equipment, games consoles, games, books and music.

**We recommend families** have additional financial support to help with rising costs and loss in incomes for families who are already the most vulnerable. This includes access to support for free school meals and information supplied clearly to families on how to access them.

### Access to Digital Support

The need for physical and social distancing has had an impact on all of the families we support. All families cited digital technology as a lifeline during this crisis, from supporting with children's education and free time to accessing vital formal and informal support from services and their own communities. Families on a low income need access to devices, broadband and items like printers, ink and apps to ensure their children don't fall behind.

**We recommend families** are offered support to access digital technology and the skills to go with it with grants or other financial support to ensure those most vulnerable are not digitally isolated, can access information on health and finance and can access the same home school resources as their peers.

**Contact details:-**

**Rachel Perrin, Partnership Development Manager** — ~~HYPERLINK "mailto:rachel.perrin@familyfund.org.uk" rachel.perrin@familyfund.org.uk~~

**Family Fund Trust:**

~~4 Alpha Court, Monks Cross Drive, York, YO32 9WN~~

~~Private company limited by guarantee. Incorporated in England and Wales. Registration no. 3166627.~~

~~Registered charity no. 1053866.~~

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