

Written Evidence submitted by Bi-borough Children's Services

Westminster City Council and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Children's Services aka Bi-borough Children's Services Submission to the Education Select Committee Inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services.

Background

Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea are prosperous, safe and healthy boroughs, where many families enjoy an excellent quality of life. There are exceptional local amenities, including outstanding schools, beautiful parks and open spaces, renowned cultural venues, internationally important heritage sites, and a vibrant arts and cultural scene. These two boroughs sitting side by side in the heart of London are excellent places to live, work, study and visit.

Average wages are distorted by those earning very high wages and average house prices in both boroughs rank highest (K&C) and second highest (W) in the country. Combined with population density it puts pressure on the supply of social housing. A visible affluence in both boroughs masks areas of deprivation. In Westminster, seven wards in the borough are among the least deprived nationally and eleven are in the top 10 per cent of most deprived. Deprivation is particularly focussed in the northwest of the borough around Church Street, and parts of Pimlico. The picture is similar in Kensington and Chelsea which overall is in the top 10 least deprived boroughs yet has several neighbourhood areas which rank in the top 10 per cent of most deprived areas in England. These areas are predominantly in North Kensington, parts of Earl's Court and in the South West of the borough.

As with other areas in the country the Covid19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the people living in both boroughs.

Opening Statement

Bi-borough Children's Services is joint arrangement between Westminster City Council and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. In 2018 we set our vision and ambition for children which is to deliver outstanding services that enable all children and young people to reach their full potential including those who are most vulnerable.

1. Throughout the extraordinary lockdown period we have prioritised and maintained our statutory services to children. Working alongside our schools, our voluntary sector partners, local businesses and Public Health we embraced working differently, breaking down boundaries between organisations to make and implement decisions quickly to keep our children and families safe.
2. To keep children and young people safe we quickly developed multi-agency practice guidance to staff outlining the changes we knew we needed to make in service delivery. We reviewed and revised all Children in Need (CIN), Children on Child Protection Plans (CP) and Looked After Children (LAC) plans to be relevant during lockdown and reviewed the data showing the timeliness of our visits and other interactions with vulnerable children and young people weekly. Even before the national offer we ensured all vulnerable families had lap-tops/internet access so we could remain in contact and young people could continue their education remotely. Working with local businesses we have been able to expand this offer to a wider pool of disadvantaged children.
3. Schools and colleges have shown resilience and flexibility over the past few months. Almost overnight many schools became hubs for the children of key workers and vulnerable children,

supporting families during the most uncertain times. Talking about the hubs, one headteacher, said, "It's been really, really rewarding and revealing. The work has been a balance between education, pastoral care and of course safety, safety has trumped everything."

4. Working with schools and others we ensured that all children entitled to free school meals are receiving at the very least a weekly voucher. We worked closely with our early years providers to ensure that younger children continued to have access to childcare provision. We adapted our children's centres/ family hubs to a virtual model providing weekly, age-appropriate activity packs for families and running virtual parenting programmes and other useful activities. We contacted every new mother, sending out new birth packs, ensuring they have a link worker who will monitor their wellbeing and support them with breastfeeding.
5. We changed the delivery model of our short breaks offer to continue to support children with disabilities. Our children in care meetings have all gone to virtual platforms, as have our child protection conferences and our looked after children reviews. We have set up 'safe hubs' to provide direct contact with children, young people and their carers. These safe spaces have been extended to our health colleagues, particularly midwives, who are concerned about the lack of contact in hospital settings. The offer that can be delivered through these hubs may continue to be expanded as more lockdown measures are relaxed.
6. As we enter the summer holiday period, we have focused on working with local providers and partners in providing an expanded programme of summer activities for young people. As has been the case since March our online communication with families particularly through the Family Information Service (FIS) has been crucial in keeping them informed about schools, settings and support available. For young people and their families dedicated sites such as [Our City](#) and in Westminster the [WCC Youth Connected Website](#) have set out clearly the wide range of opportunities and activities available.

The implementation of the critical workers policy, including the consistency in defining 'critical' work and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

7. In order to ensure schools were able to remain open and offer places to children of critical workers, in line with the critical workers policy, Bi-borough services have provided them with a range of advice and support including on mental health and domestic violence and maintained regular positive engagement with them from the outset and throughout the Covid19 lockdown period.
8. Schools response to Covid19 across Bi-borough has been exceptional. Children's services support to schools has been extensive from facilitating the provision of free school meals, to procuring laptops for vulnerable children (prior to the DfE offer). There has been fortnightly engagement between headteachers and the Education Director and his staff, additional meetings with SENCOs and facilitated sessions with headteachers and the Deputy Director Public Health to talk through and clarify government guidance on the use of PPE in education settings. We have also provided PPE where schools, special schools and early years settings have been unable to source their own.
9. Both councils have funded free parking for school staff to enable them to travel into school without having to use public transport so that there are sufficient staff on site to support children with their learning. Throughout the Easter holidays and at May half-term, play providers were funded to run holiday programmes on school sites for vulnerable children to support families and to help ensure that school staff could have a break during the holidays.

10. Support continues including:

- Regular meetings with primary headteachers and secondary headteachers to share good practice, address issues and respond with further advice/guidance.
- Key advisers in School Standards leading on a protocol to support sharing of staff and venues when establishing school hubs to secure ongoing school offer to vulnerable children and children of critical workers.
- Work with Public Health to provide advice to schools where outbreak's of Covid19 occur in education settings.

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

11. Through lockdown, our social work and early help teams have continued to work closely with vulnerable families, especially those where there are identified safeguarding risks. The commitment of staff has been impressive and staffing levels have been good throughout and capacity largely unaffected by the virus. Motivation and morale has been high with staff throughout children's services consistently working weekends and longer days.
12. Risks/needs have been considered for every child being worked with by children's social care and this is reviewed weekly. This includes children living at home and children in care. In the middle of May in the lockdown period 100% of contacts with the 59 children with child protection plans in Westminster and 100% of contacts with 41 children in Kensington and Chelsea were done to the statutory timescale. 100% of contacts with the 369 children in need in Westminster and 100% of contacts with the 444 children in need in Kensington and Chelsea were done within timescale and 100% of contacts with the 209 children in care in Westminster and 100% of contacts with the 104 children in care in Kensington and Chelsea were carried out within the period required.
13. We are also monitoring the level of contact with each child/ family to ensure it matches the level of concern. Where we are concerned about family breakdown, we are using our family therapists to provide support, using digital platforms. We have increased telephone contact and are using digital platforms to talk with children directly. Where it is safe and appropriate to do so, we continue to visit children and families.
14. We distributed re-purposed Council laptops to children and young people on a priority basis. 105 laptops were given to families open to children's social care without access to a computer in Westminster, 84 were given out in Kensington and Chelsea and an additional 30 were allocated to young people in alternative provision. 32 routers were provided in Westminster and 45 in Kensington and Chelsea. The laptops were distributed to keep families online and connected to allow access to the family services. More young people have engaged through these digital platforms than we envisaged, and families have told us that an initial visit with a social worker over a digital platform is useful.
15. With a reduction in the number of referrals coming through to our social care services as schools, settings, youth clubs and children's centres closed or were closed to the majority of children and families we developed a local safeguarding children campaign. The campaign highlighted the importance of collective community responsibility for children's safety and responsibility on residents to report concerns if they saw signs of abuse or neglect. A further public awareness campaign was launched to raise awareness of domestic abuse concerns and how to access support.

16. We rethought how we delivered our short breaks service (a service which gives families a break from their caring responsibilities) extending it to 10 new venues to continue to offer respite for the most vulnerable children with disabilities where it is safe to do so. Some of these children are receiving support in their family home and some are being brought into one of our buildings normally accessed by families for individual support.
17. Our SEN Outreach Service has been flexible in their approach so that they can provide remote support through email, telephone and video calls, to school staff and families in any local settings. The service includes qualified teachers of the deaf and vision impairment, advisory teachers for autism and speech, language and communication as well as SEN occupational therapy.
18. We continue to promote vulnerable children attending school and where they are not we work with school staff to ensure that they too are in touch with the child and their family – and that there is close liaison between the social worker and the teacher. The percentage of pupils attending schools in Westminster peaked at just over 28% before the summer break. A total of 2767 pupils out of 22262 students attending Westminster schools. At the same time 27% of vulnerable children, 359 out of a total of 1309 vulnerable children were attending school. In Kensington and Chelsea in the same time period 22% of vulnerable children attended school.
19. 1352 under-fives attended provision in Kensington and Chelsea and 1005 in Westminster before the summer break. This is 51% and 44% of 2,3, and 4 yr olds respectively who were attending provision prior to Covid19.
20. Our Local Safeguarding Children Partnership has produced multi-agency Covid19 safeguarding procedures to clarify the expectations of each agency during this time. Further, we meet with our key partners on a regular basis to review activity and our response and to share local intelligence.
21. The Childcare and Early Education Service worked closely with early years providers to ensure that all vulnerable children were contacted by either the settings or social workers/Early Help workers on a regular basis to offer families support.
22. We have organised weekly forums with early years providers (Managers/Owners, Designated Safeguarding Leads and SENCos) to keep everyone informed about the most up to date information regarding supporting vulnerable children.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to early development outcomes, the early years funded entitlement and childcare market

23. After the Government made the announcement that children of critical workers and vulnerable children were going to be able to attend provision, numerous early years providers were planning to remain open, as the number of families who qualified appeared to be quite high. However, the Government made it clear shortly after this that parents should use schools and early years providers only if it was absolutely necessary. As a result, numbers of children attending were extremely low during the first week of lockdown. This resulted in some providers deciding to close by the end of that week.
24. There were enough providers that remained open for children of critical workers and vulnerable children and capacity did not become an issue at any point. Providers were flexible and the service supported families to find alternative provision where this was required. Weekly

payments were introduced where children had to attend different settings from their usual settings to ensure that providers would have access to the funding in a timely manner (the funding was transferred between providers).

25. Many of the nurseries that closed had decided to furlough their staff and applied for Government grants that were available to businesses, as well as the Free Early Education Entitlement Funding (for 2, 3 and 4 year olds). However, providers voiced concerns regarding the viability of their businesses as they rely heavily on fees that parents pay (in addition to the funding they receive from the Government).
26. Providers were supported to prepare for the reopening of settings supported by children's services e.g. around undertaking risk assessments and developing new policies. We continued to facilitate weekly virtual forums with settings to ensure that providers were well prepared and for them to share best practice and issues which needed to be resolved.
27. The majority of settings reopened on 1st June and a large number of children under the age of five have returned to settings. So far, there have not been any settings which have indicated that they are at risk of closing down as a result of Covid19, but we continue to monitor this closely.
28. We have been working closely with the sector focussing on how providers can best support children to ensure that their needs will be met sufficiently when they return to schools and early years settings. There has been a specific focus on emotional wellbeing and mental health, as well as physical development.
29. It is anticipated that Good Level of Development measurement (of a young child's progress) at the end of year reception will be lower than usual next year and the service will continue to work with schools and early years settings to support children appropriately.
30. Funding for Schools and Nurseries remains unchanged with funding passported through the local authority and is not impacted by closure during Covid19 lockdown. The financial pressure for providers of childcare, which includes both nurseries and PVI providers is the loss of parental contribution income for fee paying placements. We are working with the DfE around future funding arrangements to address these issues, and we keep our providers informed through daily emails and weekly newsletters.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including messaging on remote learning and mental health

Remote learning

31. It has been a priority for both councils to ensure that children who were no longer attending school did not miss out on vital learning. Our Bi-borough education service has worked closely with all our headteachers on provision for home learning and have provided advice on approaches and the resources available.
32. In our primary schools, teachers are using resources including the Oak National Academy or BBC Bitewise as a core part of their provision. Some are using this as their main source of online learning and others using these to complement their own units of work. In secondary schools, along with the use of online resources, teachers have also made use of online platforms to deliver live lessons to young people working at home. Some are sending and receiving work by

email. The platforms used and the balance of online resources and direct teaching varies from school to school, but our assessment is that all schools have managed to maintain regular learning support for all their students

33. We distributed hundreds of laptops which we requested through the Department for Education scheme. In Westminster we distributed 606 laptops and tablets to disadvantaged children with 303 distributed in Kensington and Chelsea. The parents of Ibrahim, aged 11, fed back on their son receiving a laptop "Ibrahim is really enjoying his laptop and is now able to join in with his siblings in completing work by school." Another example of the impact of enabling children to learn through providing free laptops can be seen here: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/young-learner-thanks-council-donated-laptop>
34. 28 vulnerable families in Westminster and similar numbers in Kensington and Chelsea were also identified as having no current broadband connectivity. They were provided with modems and sim cards to ensure good broadband connection. We contacted a telecommunications company who agreed to provide the SIM cards at a discounted rate. The cards were provided free to residents.
35. Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea councils recently donated 30 laptops to Beachcroft and Latimer Alternative Provision Academies to support their students. Many of the pupils who attend the two schools have been excluded from mainstream school. The re-purposed and refurbished council laptops have a Microsoft licence which gives young people the tools they need to access online resources to keep learning from home.
36. Promoting activities out of school has also been important and one example of working with a local nature campaign on Bug Hotels which helped engage children and young people in the natural world during lockdown can be found here: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/bug-hotels-given-more-1000-children-westminster>

Mental health

37. It is widely acknowledged that the Covid-19 emergency and the associated policies around lockdown and social distancing are expected to have a detrimental impact on the emotional wellbeing and mental Health (EWMH) of many children and young people. This impact is expected to be wide ranging and to have an effect long beyond the period of the current lockdown.
38. Our boroughs wide EWMH offer has adapted effectively in response to the pandemic and lockdown – with providers and partners adjusting their delivery models quickly – so as to be able to continue to provide support across the whole Thrive spectrum of need. Thrive is a dynamic, developmental and trauma-sensitive approach to meeting the emotional and social needs of children. Examples of our support include:
 - We are providing a number of activity packs to children and families who had been accessing services at our family hub and we are keeping our family information service website up-to-date so that families know what support is available and where (domestic abuse, mental health and emotional wellbeing, child care, nursery and school provision and more...). The local offer for children with special educational needs and disabilities is also being kept up-to-date and our parent/carer forum are in touch with a significant number of parents to provide informal support.

- Our trauma informed and systemic workforces have been well placed to support children, young people and families across the system – to deal with the detrimental emotional wellbeing and mental health impact of lockdown.
- Our Kooth online offer of information and counselling available to all 11-25 year olds in the boroughs has been widely promoted.
- Our commissioned Grenfell Providers have adapted their services to deliver online activities and programmes, as well as continuing to provide therapeutic support one to one via phone calls and video conferencing. Therapists touch in and touch out with parents, closely adhere to safeguarding practices, signpost families to statutory and community support, and are in regular contact with school leads
- CAMHS are continuing to support all children and young people they work with as well as being open to new referrals. Clinicians continue to offer a mixture of face to face, telephone appointments and video conferencing
- CAMHS have introduced a 24/7 Crisis Service to divert children and young people away from attending at A&E and provide responsive and effective support

Summer activities

39. Across Bi-borough local youth organisations have adapted well to providing an online offer which is being mapped out along with face-to-face activities. We currently have an agreed summer programme from Youth Hubs, Youth Clubs and Play providers covering more than 40 venues across the two boroughs. In general, all providers are operating on a “bubble” model and are only allowing attendees who are pre-booked to attend activities. This is an evolving picture which we will adapt as national guidance changes.
40. One example in Westminster is the St Andrew’s Club summer project which includes activities such as a gardening club, ‘blinging’ water bottles, table tennis tournaments, street play, cookery clubs, sports week, graffiti and surprise days for children and young people aged 8-11 and 13+.
41. One example in Kensington and Chelsea is Dalgarno Youth Club which is running a programme of activities including boxing, fitness sessions, arts and crafts, football, badminton and one to one sessions with vulnerable young people from the start of the school holidays to the end of August.
42. We are also working on additional projects in response to Covid19 focusing on sports sessions, additional youth work sessions and education and learning loss. The latter aims to help young people catch up on the schoolwork they have missed.
43. Play for younger children is also available in both boroughs covering a wide range of play activities. At Soho Parish Primary there are play, art, physical activity and socialisation activities.

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)

Effect on disadvantaged groups

44. While the coronavirus pandemic has impacted on every child, it is likely to have had a harsher impact on those who are already living in poverty. The increase in financial instability as a result of this crisis will have hit low-income families the hardest. With more children at home, the cost of living will have increased for families, which means FSM provision is increasingly important and its continuation through the summer funded by government is both needed and welcomed.

45. Our BAME residents are at greater risk of infection from COVID and this will have caused concern and distress to families from those groups. Black Caribbean and Mixed White & Black Caribbean pupils are twice as likely to be identified with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs as White British pupils.
46. Of the children and young people with EHCPs in Kensington and Chelsea Schools nearly 70% are BME. Of the larger group of children and young people receiving SEN Support, three quarters are BME. In Westminster schools nearly 85% of those with EHCPs are BME and four out of five of those receiving SEN Support are BME.
47. We use a systemic practice model to help practitioners understand power and how people perceive it. Most families will perceive themselves as 'powerless' and social workers as 'powerful'. We use a concept called 'social graces' – a mnemonic referring to gender, geography, race, religion, ability, age, culture, class, ethnicity, education, sexuality and spirituality – to give our staff a framework to understand and to acknowledge this power dynamic. This allows us to respect the knowledge and expertise that families and their communities bring so we can invite conversations about power difference and inequality. Being explicit about this power difference helps us to act more ethically and deliver our interventions more thoughtfully. This in turn helps us when having more challenging conversations around Covid19.
48. Our Educational Psychologists have developed resources to support transition and recovery based on five principles. They are working with schools for individual children and young people to ensure effective tracking of their well-being, offering webinars on resilience, social behaviour.

Provision of FSM

49. The councils have been supporting 60 schools in Westminster and 40 schools in Kensington and Chelsea to implement guidance to ensure that pupils learning from home are able to access Free School Meals via voucher schemes. This translated to supporting just under 3300 pupils in Kensington and Chelsea and just over 6100 pupils in Westminster to access free schools during the pandemic.
50. Prior to the Government's national approach to the provision of Free School Meals, schools adjusted their own FSM arrangements and these changes were communicated to parents. In some cases, schools used their own facilities or catering companies to deliver their FSM and where schools were open, catering companies would prepare the meals for pupils in attendance as well as for collection by parents or delivery. Some schools were also providing vouchers/pre-paid cards.
51. From the end of March, the government provided guidance to schools for a national voucher system, which was directly financed by the DfE that uplifted the daily amount from £2.50 to £3.00. The national voucher scheme was delivered through an organisation called Edenred. The council supported schools in liaising with Edenred to work through early issues around the implementation of the scheme and we were in constant touch with DfE seeking to resolve the most pressing issues.
52. Schools continue to have a responsibility to ensure that Free School Meals are provided to vulnerable children, using their budgets where necessary to ensure that this is met. Schools have taken sensible steps from the start of this extraordinary period to secure vouchers either through donations or through purchasing using their own budgets. They used these in

particularly pressing cases. As a backstop we highlighted to schools information about our local Food Banks where families were worried about having access to food.

Long term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with SEND)

53. Despite all the measures schools have put in place we have been conscious and concerned about the impact non-attendance at school is likely to have on children and young people, especially the most vulnerable groups, such as pupils with SEND.
54. Many vulnerable children will be becoming adults and will need access to services that will support them during this challenging time. Covid-19 has disrupted the delivery of career guidance to support post-16 progression planned by schools and between schools and colleges. Youth employment and the prospects for new school leavers seeking employment are adversely affected during what is anticipated to be a difficult financial climate and we note that some employers are withdrawing apprenticeship opportunities. SEND support students would normally have benefitted from ongoing face-to-face guidance, career fairs and college taster and open days. Careers guidance (in schools and colleges) is adapting to provide distance support and virtual activities, including online open days. Partners are being identified, including local business, who may contribute to potential careers guidance and progression activities over the summer break.
55. While we continued to promote vulnerable children attending school, as was the case nationally only a small percentage attended. It's important to consider the long-term implications of this extended absence from school on children's emotional and social wellbeing – as well as their learning. We are talking with the Department for Education and with schools about a recovery curriculum to really focus on these things, as well as developing virtual transition packages for children moving from nursery to primary, primary to secondary and secondary to college.
56. From the moment of lockdown, and throughout the crisis, our SEND Local Offer websites have acted as a hub of information for families and professionals, including staff from our local schools, and will continue to do so as lockdown restrictions are eased. We very quickly set up a 'Virtual SENCO Forum' for all schools across both boroughs – this has enabled us to maintain regular communication with schools specifically around the support of CYP with SEND. The virtual forum takes place fortnightly and will continue to do so, even as lockdown measures are eased – it will be a key route for us to understand the needs of this group of children and young people as they return to school and the training and support that will be required for settings from our SEN Outreach Services.
57. Our SEN Outreach Services for children with autism and sensory impairment rapidly changed their delivery model so that support can be provided remotely and directly to families who were now at home rather than in a school setting – we have learned a lot from this and will be incorporating into future service development – a key priority for us is to safely transition to a new way of working, particularly where specialist teachers who would traditionally have attended several settings in a day (with associated travel requirements) begin to be asked to return to schools.
58. We have worked closely with our partners from the CCG and health providers to ensure that appropriate support has been available within the constraints that the NHS have been working during the crisis. This has included the availability of an advice line for any parents of children who are in receipt of therapies, so that they can speak to the team whenever required. Safely reintroducing therapies such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy will be a priority going forward.

59. Many families of children and young people with SEND will have found lockdown especially difficult. We will continue to work closely with our local parent carer forums to understand the needs that families are facing, so that Children's Services and our partners can take a holistic approach to support. Engagement with our local children and young people has been incredibly important during lockdown, to ensure they continue to feel connected to the wider community and the services that support them. We want to build on this and have started by conducting a survey of CYP of their experiences of lockdown and their thoughts about returning to school, which is informing our local planning.
60. Supported internships are an important way in which young people are supported to move into employment. During lockdown these placements were suspended and education centres such as the Maida Vale campus were closed. Getting the nine interns set up with technology and laptops to learn remotely was an immediate priority. The interns' personal access to technology varied from full internet and laptop access to limited access using small tablets, which posed some challenges teaching.
61. An Overarching partnership approach with the education institution and employment support provider has been crucial. All decisions have been seen through the lens of achieving employment outcomes for the nine young people currently on the programme and ensuring capacity for new intake. That work is ongoing.

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

62. Central to contingency planning is retaining the flexibility and inter-agency collaborative relationships which we developed from the start of lockdown in March. We have been able to work in a way which a few months previously would have felt impossible or at least time consuming and challenging. We are in a good position to do this in the case of any future national emergency.
63. Our recovery planning will make a significant contribution to wider contingency planning. We have looked at the practices that have worked well across education and children's social care, some of these we will mainstream and they will become our 'new normal'. We will be working over the next six months on developing longer term plans and embedding these changes as part of whole organisation recovery and re-enabling plans.
64. In London, regional level relationships, communication and principles around mutual aid have strengthened. We like other councils have shown ourselves and others that we are agile, adaptive and responsive to the needs of our children and their families. Directors of Children's Services are already working and planning together to be able to respond to either a 'second wave' of Covid19 or a future national emergency.

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