

Children's Parliament – Written Evidence (LBC0073)

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to submit views to the Committee's inquiry.

Children's Parliament is Scotland's Centre for Excellence for children's participation and engagement. Our dream is that children grow up in a world of love, happiness and understanding. Our mission is to inspire greater awareness and understanding of the power of children's human rights and to support implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) across Scotland. We work with partners to evidence how a children's human rights approach improves outcomes for children. You can learn more about our work here: <https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/>

Since the start of the lockdown children aged 8 to 14 have been part of a conversation with Children's Parliament about their experiences of the virus and of lockdown. From questions and worries, to learning at home, to family and peer relationships, to health and wellbeing, children have been responding in large numbers to a wellbeing survey called **How are you doing?** (3,000+ every month April, May and June to date) and a number of Members of Children's Parliament (MCPs) have been working as journalists and writing in response to questions posed over a series of the **Corona Times Journal**. All the work is published here: bit.ly/Coronavirus_Kids

We have learned many things about immediate impacts and what is needed to mitigate those that are negative. We understand however that the Committee is interested in the long-term implications of the pandemic and so it is this we focus on here, using the questions provided by the Committee.

Are there any positives you would take from this pandemic?

There are positives that we can identify, but these are all caveated to some extent with some concerns we need to address in the longer term.

Children are resilient. Our large-scale *How are you doing?* survey and the individual stories told through our *Corona Times Journal* have evidenced that children can, for the most part, cope with change and adversity. Having acknowledged this our work has shown a deterioration in children's self-reported mental health over time, particularly for girls. There is a balance then in recognising that most children will bounce back with appropriate care and support, whilst maintaining a close eye on the likelihood that some children who may have struggled with mental health previously (perhaps exhibited in aspects of social relationships or school attendance or behaviour) will need more time to settle back in to routines and also that some children who had prior to lockdown been presenting and functioning well, may now present as anxious or uncertain about the return to some degree of normality.

We have learned that it is in their family that most children have found love and support to weather the pandemic. Throughout the provisions of the UNCRC there is explicit recognition of the importance of parents and the family to children. It is clear that the best interests of the child are usually served by supporting the

child's family, the UNCRC places obligations on governments to invest in supporting families. However children have also told us about their worries for their family. From our survey responses over 60% of children worry about the health of someone in their family and 29% reported that their parents/carers worry about having enough money for the family. If we recognise that families matter, we need to invest in supporting them both in terms of mental health and wellbeing and addressing poverty.

What are the things that you are most worried about?

The things that we worry about most for the longer-term are rooted in concerns that already exist – how we address the needs of the most vulnerable children and how we change an education system whose weaknesses have been exposed by the lockdown.

The most vulnerable children – those living in poverty, those with no technology to support learning and maintain connections, those living in homes where there is violence – have had a bad experience of lockdown. They have in effect been cut off from all the supports and safeguards they had outside the home. In the long-term, how might those children feel other than abandoned, frustrated, more isolated? Anecdotally it is expected that there will be increased demands on services when the extent of some of these experiences surface when children re-connect with school and other services. Community-based services that support women and children experiencing domestic violence have already seen this surge in demand. The agency Citizens Advice Scotland report an increase in families reporting difficulties with paying rent and fears about evictions. As we emerge from lockdown this begs the question, are we ready and adequately prepared to address needs and acknowledge the rights of the child to be protected from harm?

A particular focus of our engagement with children over recent months has been on the experience of learning at home – this has two elements, the work sent by school and the other learning that has been possible due to being at home with siblings and parents or carers. The latter has been something children have talked about positively. Notwithstanding how difficult a job many parents or carers have had to support learning, children have talked about baking together, going out on walks together, chatting and playing games, as the best thing about lockdown. The former has been problematic for many children. Schools were slow to adapt and connect with children. It took until very late into lockdown before some children were even connected to online learning. This is not to criticise our teacher colleagues, the reality is that the pandemic has exposed the fact that we have a very conservative, school-estate based education system with little attention paid to home learning or the less formal/alternative 'curriculum' that children access. Of course one consequence of the lockdown has been some discussion of the idea of 'blended learning' which acknowledges both learning at home in the community and learning in school. But of course it is just that, an idea. Our system is not built to accommodate or foster learning other than what happens in school buildings between 9 and 3.30. With the low levels of infection we now see it looks like the plan is 'back to normal'.

So, in terms of education, do we just allow this to happen? Get back to normal and consider this past few months as a blip? This would be such a missed opportunity. Like others, Children's Parliament is creating resources that will

support schools to deliver what many people are referring to as a recovery curriculum. This would focus on one of the 8 curriculum areas in Curriculum for Excellence, Health and Wellbeing. The truth is that while this curricular area has always supposed to have been the responsibility of all it has been the poor relation. We could change this now, we could abandon any attempt to get back to a traditional timetable. The greatest challenge to doing this would be in the secondary school sector and yet this is probably the setting in which it is most necessary. In our survey work it was amongst the 12 to 14 year olds that mental health suffered most during lockdown, and especially amongst girls.

In summary, our worry is that post-lockdown we are about to fail children further – both those we already knew were vulnerable and those who have increased worry or anxiety about the return to school. Normal is not good enough. We managed to lockdown for several months but the rush to normal is going to leave more children behind.

What do you most hope changes for the better?

In Scotland we are on the brink of incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic law. The irony is that this is about to happen when we are experiencing a lack of recognition of childrens experiences and views on the return to school. This is not a failure of all those colleagues who throughout the lockdown have been diligently reading the reports we have produced based on our *How are you doing?* survey and *Corona Times Journal*. We know that policy colleagues and practitioners have been talking about what they read, and have used this information to inform very immediate considerations and mitigating actions. Rather, we need those in leadership and those with power to pause and think beyond the short-term. Planning for the medium to long-term must be informed by, and be seen to be informed by, the views, experiences, needs and rights of children. We are tired of hearing the word *unprecedented*. These may be challenging times but we cannot allow this to be an excuse for a failure to reflect and properly consider how to do things differently. So, breathe. Listen. Take stock. Make your commitment to children clear and decisive and act *only* in *their* best interests.

In conclusion

The Committee is inviting people to share their hopes and fears about what the pandemic might mean in the long-term for our lives, how we function as a society. Our biggest concern is that the focus now is on heaving a huge sigh of relief and 'getting back to normal'. What was normal? Well, if it was anything it was not good enough. Too many children living in poverty (and more now). Too many children experiencing neglect and violence. Too many children disengaged from learning or not receiving the support they should have by right.

When it comes to future preparedness, if we were to find ourselves in a similar situation again, the question is are our education and social work/children's systems and services in a place where they could respond adequately, or would be back where we were, at a standing start, taking too long to catch up and take care of the most vulnerable children who were left behind this time round?

4 August 2020