

Estimates Day, Department for Education: Closing the disadvantage gap and support for left behind children

House of Commons

7 July 2020



Key messages

- Effective, high quality early years provision makes a difference to young children, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage, improving social mobility and offering them a good start in life. Early years providers have stepped in to provide care for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, to help deal with the COVID-19 crisis. The Government must ensure that there is enough money to support providers who are closed to make sure there are sufficient childcare spaces when the current crisis ends.
- Children with social workers are more likely to experience poor educational outcomes than their peers. The Department for Education's (DfE) Children in Need review in 2019 identified that 'children who have needed a social worker have poorer educational outcomes at every stage of education than those who have not, and taking account of other factors associated with attainment, are up to 50 per cent less likely to achieve a strong pass in English and maths GCSEs'.¹
- Councils are concerned about additional vulnerabilities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes more families living in poverty; mental health issues amongst both children and parents; increasing domestic abuse; and increasing substance misuse issues. In particular, councils are concerned that falling referrals to children's social care following the partial closure of schools means that children are experiencing 'hidden harm'.
- Councils have continued to support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Significant extra pressure has been placed on council's SEND teams to support children and young people due to COVID-19, due to an increased volume of work. We want to work with the Department for Education to tackle outstanding issues, such as the provision of home-to-school transport.
- Our '[Re-thinking local](#)', the LGAs virtual conference report, highlights a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to address the stark inequalities the pandemic has exposed, including those affecting vulnerable children. Local government is offering to build on the effective partnerships established with schools and settings to support and protect children, young people and families. We are asking Government to invest in preventative universal and early help services to ensure that children, young people and families receive the practical, emotional, educational and mental health support they need, as soon as they need it.

Briefing

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Further information

Early years services

Effective, high quality early years provision makes a difference to young children, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage, improving social mobility and offering them a good start in life. Childcare providers have been a vital part of the nation's response to coronavirus and councils have been working closely with them to ensure that vulnerable children and critical workers have the childcare they need.

While early years and childcare providers have been asked to step up in the same way that schools have in recent months, their costs have not been covered in the same way.

Limits on the number of children who can attend settings and reduced demand from parents mean that settings simply cannot raise the income they usually would. This is already putting businesses, jobs and childcare places at risk. It is therefore vital that the Government urgently provides additional funding at a national level to protect childcare providers and see them through this crisis.

The Government has said that settings should continue to receive their early years entitlements funding, even if they closed. However, this funding only covers around half of a private nursery's costs with the remaining derived largely from parent fees, which have clearly been significantly cut as most children stay at home. Around two thirds of private nurseries closed as a result, while those that remained open struggled financially, with some operating at a loss.

This financial concern has been compounded by the Government's decision that early years settings are unable to access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) in full. They can only access the scheme for the proportion of their payroll that can be said to be privately funded. For example, if a setting receives 50 per cent of its funding from parent fees, it can claim the CJRS for 50 per cent of its payroll. This is despite previous DfE guidance stating that the Government will contribute 80 per cent of each worker's wages of up to £2,500, backdated to 1 March 2020 and that settings can access the scheme while continuing to be paid the early entitlements funding via local authorities. Many settings made business decisions to close based on the understanding that they could access both sets of funding.

The Government will also need to consider the impact on early years settings of a phased return to normal – if settings reopen but have significantly reduced demand for a period of time, they will struggle financially to operate. Analysis by the Sutton Trust identifies that a third of settings in the most deprived areas believe they are unlikely to be operating next year.ⁱⁱ

Children's social care

Referrals to children's social care have fallen during the pandemic and lockdown and a surge in the number of children needing support is anticipated as we move out of the initial response phase. The real challenge for children's services, in both financial and delivery terms, is therefore yet to come.

The significant challenges currently in providing the right placements for children in care will become even more apparent if we see an increase in children coming into care or a spike in placement breakdowns as restrictions are lifted. Councils and the government will need to work urgently to expand local provision, both in-house and working with private and voluntary sector providers, to ensure children have safe, loving homes appropriate for their needs.

Children with social workers are more likely to experience poor educational outcomes than their peers. The DfE's Children in Need review in 2019 identified that "children who have needed a social worker have poorer educational outcomes at every stage of education than those who have not, and taking account of other factors associated with attainment, are up to 50 per cent less likely to achieve a strong pass in English and maths GCSEs".ⁱⁱⁱ While schools remained open to these children throughout the lockdown period, attendance was very low throughout, emphasising the importance of home learning.^{iv}

Councils have raised concerns that many children in need do not have good access to a computer or other device for online learning (for example, in households with one computer for the family), or to an internet connection. Work by the DfE to provide vulnerable children with devices to enable online learning is welcome, however putting in place a national procurement programme clearly takes time, and many devices were not delivered until June, more than two months after most children stopped attending school. This is a significant amount of time for children to have only very limited access to learning. We believe a more localised solution, with councils procuring devices and being reimbursed by the Government, would have been a quicker and more effective solution.

Councils are concerned about additional vulnerabilities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes more families living in poverty; mental health issues amongst both children and parents; increasing domestic abuse; and increasing substance misuse issues. In particular, councils are concerned that falling referrals to children's social care following the partial closure of schools means that children are experiencing 'hidden harm', which may only come to light as we move into recovery. Work is taking place locally to try to ensure that partners and communities are engaged in identifying children at risk, however councils are also planning for a spike in referrals when all children return to school.

It is likely that the impacts of these issues on children will be far-reaching, lasting far beyond the recovery period for some, resulting in ongoing pressures for children's services after other areas may have recovered. It is vital that the Government considers this in its recovery planning, ensuring that the right services are available to provide children and their families with support to come to terms with any trauma suffered during the pandemic, and to go on to live happy, healthy lives.

SEND

Significant extra pressure has been placed on council's SEND teams to support children and young people due to COVID-19, due to an increased volume of work. Specifically, this has included increased contact with parents and families, the creation of new and extension of existing services and; the re-design of delivery models. This is in addition to co-ordinating risk assessments, making home arrangements for the most vulnerable; and fielding increased parental enquiries. We are concerned that many children with SEND whose needs have not been entirely met while they have been away from school, will require additional support when they return, for example additional support from Educational Psychologists, and this will place additional requirements on already stretched high needs budgets.

As schools return in September, councils have flagged concerns about their ability to deliver home-to-school transport services. Specific concerns focus on the capacity of providers to supply sufficient numbers of buses and other vehicles that allow for social distancing, increasing costs, particularly in terms of home-to-school transport for children with SEND, the safety of the workforce providing these services and; persuading parents that it is safe for their children to use public transport to travel to school when wider messaging has been to use only when

absolutely necessary.

Rethinking Local

Our *Re-thinking Local* conference paper^v highlights how the 2020 Spending Review, Budget and English Devolution White Paper will be key opportunities to put in place sustainable funding solutions and move towards greater fiscal devolution, to allow councils to deliver for their local communities and, in doing so, level up the inequalities faced by our communities.

The paper highlights a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to address the stark inequalities the pandemic has exposed, including those affecting vulnerable children. Local government is offering to build on the effective partnerships established with schools and settings to support and protect children, young people and families. We are asking Government to invest in preventative universal and early help services to ensure that children, young people and families receive the practical, emotional, educational and mental health support they need, as soon as they need it.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need#key-findings-from-our-data-and-analysis>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/coronavirus-impacts-early-years>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need#key-findings-from-our-data-and-analysis>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings>

^v

https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/3.70%20Rethinking%20local_%23councilscan_landscape_FINAL.pdf