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Response to Parliamentary Select Committee on the Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's services: Call for Evidence

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Key Points

1. Both statutory and third sector organisations were able to adapt to the lockdown measures, continuing to provide some form of provision, mainly virtually.
2. Safeguarding services have seen a significant reduction in referrals, raising concerns about the physical safety of vulnerable children and young people.
3. Accounts from services working with children and young people are worried about the impact of the virus and the lockdown measures on their emotional wellbeing. These concerns were echoed by young people themselves.
4. A dramatic increase in use of Foodbanks and food pantries by families highlights the hardship experienced in the immediate crisis.
5. Universal Credit claims and accounts from local Citizen Advice branches indicate the potential for significant longer-term hardship implications, particularly in the most disadvantaged families.

Introduction, Background & Methods

The following research was carried out by the Centre for Citizenship and Community at the University of Central Lancashire in collaboration with West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum. We brought together key stakeholders working with disadvantaged children and young people in West Cumbria to respond to the specific terms of reference below:

- To describe the impact on ‘children’s and young people’s mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.’
- To describe ‘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).’

We hope this response provides evidence to the above terms of reference from a West Cumbrian perspective, characterised a white ‘left behind’ coastal community (Centre for Social Justice, 2013).

Background

West Cumbria is a coastal, ex-mining community consisting of the Boroughs of Allerdale and Copeland. The main employer for the area is the Sellafield nuclear site which creates income inequalities between those who work within the sector and those who do not, where affluent neighbourhood’s border social housing estates experiencing significant poverty. The geographic positioning of West Cumbria leaves communities vulnerable to both real and cultural isolation, resulting in some residents feeling that the area has been ‘left behind’. This impacts on the aspirations of children and young people, as they have limited opportunities for new experiences, particularly in those who have limited access to transport (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019).

Children’s Social Care

All Children’s Social Care teams and the Cumbria Children’s Safeguarding Hub have remained open, maintaining contact with children and their families and carers. Social work teams are working closely with school safeguarding leads to ensure regular contact with families of vulnerable children who are assessed as needing to access one of the county’s school hubs. The Cumbria Safeguarding Children’s Partnership (CSCP) continues to meet fortnightly to ensure that partners are focused on issues, that assurances are sought around children’s safety, that shared actions are tracked and monitored, and that learning is captured and evidenced.

Child and Youth Work

Children’s Centres, operating within Cumbria County Council’s 0-19 Early Help contract, provided by Family Action are closed. However, some services are continuing to be delivered virtually or over the phone. These include supportive services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disability

(SEND), post-natal mothers, breastfeeding mothers, families experiencing domestic violence and new mums – alongside engaging with parents through social media. The lockdown restrictions have forced all youth providers to suspend face-to-face delivery. Many of these work in areas experiencing significant poverty. However, despite these restrictions, many are continuing to engage with young people in West Cumbria in creative ways. Within Copeland 88% of youth providers who were approached stated that they were engaging with young people. This was mainly through online groups which included quizzes, games and cooking sessions, and through social media platforms such as Facebook. Whilst this was not felt to be an ideal way to engage with young people, youth providers overwhelmingly felt that this was a valuable service during this time. Participation rates have generally been below that seen in face-to-face service delivery, but youth providers are finding that it is the most vulnerable young people who are attending online sessions.

Methodology

Evidence presented in this paper has been taken from a larger rapid response paper produced by West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum which highlights the potential impact of the COVID-19 on children and young people in West Cumbria, particularly those in poverty or who are otherwise vulnerable. This report combined national and local public data with that from both a survey of West Cumbrian children and young people and accounts from key stakeholders such as teaching staff and youth workers.

Evidence

Children and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

Physical Safety

Accounts from the police, Children's Services and child counselling services reveal that there has been a reduction in reports or referrals to all these services. This may be due to the referral system that is currently in place, whereby most referrals are received from schools, that whilst closed, are only able to contact children by phone and will not therefore be in a position either to have conversations with children of the usual quality or to know if it is safe for a child to disclose information. The reduction in referrals is raising concerns about families who are currently unable to

ask for help and are physically and psychologically at risk. Indeed, domestic abuse cases referred into Copeland Borough Council have decreased by 80% compared with the data from the same period during 2019 (23rd March to 11th May). Cumbria is the eighth most vulnerable county for children in need (CIN) who are also young carers (Children's Commissioner, 2020).

Emotional Wellbeing

Youth practitioners have expressed concerns about increased levels of anxiety and loneliness, along with increased drug and alcohol use. These have been most marked in vulnerable groups, such as those in supported accommodation or in the care system. Furthermore, survey data shows that some young people with existing mental health issues felt that lockdown prevented them using their usual coping strategies, which adversely affected their wellbeing. Young people with anxiety disorders express particular concern about the health of their respective families.

A loss of structure, through the closure of schools, is impacting on sleep patterns. Accounts from children and young people themselves, along with youth practitioners show that many are staying up late and gaming, which is impacting on their ability to function during the day.

These accounts reveal that the worst thing about lockdown is the experience of missing friends and this is confirmed by survey data in which 44.4% of participants reported that the pandemic had had a negative effect on their mental state, with the issue of loneliness caused by social distancing and separation, being more significant than concerns about the coronavirus itself.

Furthermore, both children and young people and practitioners expressed concerns about missing opportunities to have closure with some (though not all) schools having needed to close without providing opportunities for students to say goodbye to one another as part of enrichment activities such as school trips or those concerned with transition. This issue is of some importance for those leaving years 6 or 11 who have now been deprived of the opportunity to engage in the conventional practices and rites of passage involved in leaving school.

Practitioners are concerned that the reduction in safeguarding and mental health referrals indicates a hidden vulnerability that will begin to emerge when children and young people return to education. These concerns relate to neglect, abuse and emotional wellbeing. Although children and young people have not said that they are worried about the long-term impact of these on their emotional wellbeing, practitioners have indicated that there are concerns about the emotional wellbeing of children and young people across West Cumbria. Specifically, practitioners are

concerned about bereavement and trauma, the impacts of a loss of connection with social networks (and hence fractured relationships) and a worrying increase in substance abuse. In anticipation of this increased vulnerability, the government has released funding to support schools in responding to the growing welfare needs of students. There is an expectation that this will involve partnership working with existing youth organisations and other partners.

The effect on disadvantaged groups and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups

Despite the Government launching its Free School Meal voucher scheme, many households have been experiencing food poverty. The online scheme has been difficult for schools and parents to access, and for the first month of operation was only available through a discrete number of larger supermarkets. This posed a significant challenge to our rural communities and families who were unable to travel to town centres to do their shopping.

As part of the community response, food pantries have been established across West Cumbria. In Copeland alone 321 food parcels were distributed between 23rd March and 5th May 2020. Many of these were to families, most of whom had never used Foodbanks or food pantries in the past. The most common reasons for seeking this support was financial hardship - whether that be from inability to access FSM support (living in a low-income home pre-COVID) or as a result of facing new financial difficulties due to employment. During the first 6 weeks of lockdown, Citizens Advice Copeland recorded a five-fold increase in queries around employment, with a large proportion of the population of West Cumbria experiencing furlough, redundancy, or unemployment.

Likewise, Citizens Advice Allerdale saw an initial increase in the need for its service and a protracted increase in the range of issues people that people have required help with. There has been a sharp increase in advice and support regarding benefits, employment, requests for food vouchers and assistance to top-up energy prepayment meters (due to reduced or, in some cases, a complete absence of current income). From 23rd March to 24th April 2020, Citizens Advice Allerdale helped 389 clients with 1269 issues plus 183 simple queries (such as sign posting and basic information). Furthermore, 129 requests for help with food vouchers, 520 benefit queries and 121 queries relating to employment issues were issued. Across the county, the number of Universal Credit claimants (including those not required to seek work and those claiming whilst in work) in April was 28,441, a rise of 8,659 (44%) from the previous month.

The economic implications of COVID-19 are yet to be realised. However, an analysis by Cumbria Intelligence Observatory of ONS data reveals that on 9th April, the claimant count in Cumbria (this is

those on JSA/UC available and actively seeking work) was 12,530, an increase of 5,595 (81%) from March. This increase is the highest since data first became available for Cumbria in January 1986.

The table below provides some emerging data on the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, outlining the monthly percentage increase in Universal Credit claims and the percentage decrease in job postings (Cumbria Intelligence Observatory, 2020).

	UK	Cumbria	Allerdale	Copeland
Universal Credit Claims (March to April 2020)	+40%	+44%	+32%	+23%
Job Postings (Feb-April 2020)	-53%	-54%	-74%	-39%

The largest increase in claims is for those aged under 34-years. When looking at these figures it must be noted that there could be a proportionally greater increase in Universal Credit claims in the next month's figures (June 2020) as the above data only shows claims up to 9th April, which was only 3 weeks from the start of lockdown. This data strongly indicates that the number of children experiencing financial hardship is rising significantly, particularly in younger families.

Child practitioners have stated that when the initial lockdown measures were introduced most nurseries were forced to close and some of these are at risk of closure becoming permanent due to the financial impact of the lockdown. As families are encouraged to return to work, the reduced capacity of independent childcare providers may prevent some families from doing so, thus creating additional detrimental impacts on the ability of some families to make ends meet. Children's Services have expressed concern about how this is disproportionately impacting on women in employment.

The risk of significant long-term impact transcends the poverty that families may experience through the loss of parental or family income; it could potentially impact children's own employability in the future, particularly in relation to the leisure, service and tourism industries all of which are critically important to the West Cumbrian economy.

Recommendations

A number of factors need to be considered in light of the experiences of families in West Cumbria. Many families will experience not just one, but several of the multiple vulnerabilities outlined above and it should be remembered that prior to the lockdown, 70% of families in poverty were working

families (Child Poverty Action Group, 2019). Austerity further weakened foundations which were already buckling under pressure and COVID-19 has served to highlight this. After 10 years of hardship, both public services and the third sector are going to face a challenge of supporting our most vulnerable children and young people that is now monumental. In reflection of this, we make the following recommendations.

1. We recommend that the committee notes that the evidence of the effects of austerity across all public services has made the challenging task of responding to the demands of COVID-19, exponentially more difficult.
2. While the primary impact of COVID-19 has to be seen in relation to health, the importance of its secondary impacts for vulnerable children and young people, including the socio-economic, educational, and emotional effects, must be considered longer-term significance. Building emotional wellbeing and resilience for all ages must be seen as an essential ingredient of effective support.
3. Given that there is every indication that this will be a long-term recovery project, we call for the committee to consider the development of a COVID-19 Ten Year Recovery Plan, taking into account the strategic role of national government and also the role of local authorities, building on the framework of the local Hubs Resilience Forums.
4. We encourage the committee to consider important role of national government in supporting local authorities to continue to remove the perceived barriers between services, communities and individuals, building strong, respectful relationships which in turn will contribute to the recovery stage of the crisis.
5. We recommend local and national recognition of the value of everyone's contribution to the network of services that we have highlighted as crucial to recovery. Developing organisational collaboration is an essential ingredient for the alleviation of child poverty.
6. We call on national and local government to critically reflect on their policies and review these, to ensure that the welfare of our most vulnerable families is protected as a priority.
7. We encourage schools to use this experience to further strengthen home-school relationships with these vulnerable families. This includes research into the effectiveness of IT supported learning during the lockdown which has the potential to identify innovative practices that can supplement traditional methods.
8. We call for the committee to develop innovative ways to, engage with the next generation whose future depends most upon the outcomes of the reconstruction of our society, post-COVID-19. As the empowered citizens of the future, their engagement is an essential condition for the wider transformation to an equitable and sustainable society of the future.

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