

▶ The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services: Response to the Education Select Committee Inquiry

▶ A response from London Councils

London Councils represents London's 32 borough councils and the City of London. It is a cross-party organisation that works on behalf of all of its member authorities to make the case for powers, freedoms and resources to best serve the needs of London's residents and businesses.

1. The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

- The London boroughs have been working hard with schools to ensure as many schools have been able to stay open as needed to provide places for all the eligible vulnerable and key worker children that require places. The boroughs have been supporting schools and providing advice on how to take appropriate measures to keep children and staff safe during the pandemic, e.g. implementing social distancing and new cleaning regimes.

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

- During the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown the London boroughs have proven themselves to be sufficiently resilient to be able to continue to deliver core children's services such as operating and staffing Emergency Duty Teams and continuing to deliver essential face to face services. We have been monitoring service performance and staffing levels throughout the peak of the pandemic on a daily basis and all boroughs have been able to cope with levels of demand. While activity levels may have initially dropped off, they have recovered and in many places are operating at the levels expected in a business as usual context. The Directors of Children's Services from the London boroughs put in place mutual aid arrangements to ensure that resources could be shared if any borough did encounter any difficulties during this time, but this was not required.

- London borough Children's Services have continued to support vulnerable children and their families that are known to the local authority through ongoing social worker contact time, sometimes online. Part of this work has included encouraging many to return to school where they can receive additional support, where appropriate. Given the public health emphasis on staying at home it is understandable why initially the numbers of vulnerable children in school were very low but since Easter we have seen an upturn in the number of vulnerable children attending schools across London. The London boroughs will continue to work closely with this cohort of children and young people to encourage more back to school and to ensure they all receive appropriate levels of support wherever they are located.
- London local government has come together on a range of key areas to improve children's services, particularly to support vulnerable children and young people. For example, they are developing a pan London approach to improving the availability of placements to meet very complex needs which would help to build capacity in the sector. They are also working closely with the Youth Justice Board to ensure a collective response to support families at risk of Domestic Abuse.

3. The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to: Children's early development; the early years funded entitlement and the childcare market

- London Councils has considerable concerns about the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on the early years sector in particular. Many providers have been struggling financially with the loss of income and the uncertainty around future funding is creating significant anxiety in the sector. The Early Years Alliance (EYA) is reporting that 26% of the London providers it surveyed think it is unlikely that they will still be operational in a year's time. Many London boroughs have reported similar concerns to us.
- It is not yet clear what the levels of demand will be for early years places once recovery from the Covid-19 outbreak is underway. Some parents may have become unemployed or their jobs have not yet reopened, so will no longer need early years places, at least in the short term. The fear factor may also prevent other parents sending their children back to nursery. Fewer parents in work also means fewer children would be eligible for the 30 hours entitlement. It will be important for Government to support the sector through the transition to ensure that there are enough places still available for parents when full recovery is reached.
- If Covid-19 has such a detrimental impact on the early years settings leading to the closure of many nurseries, as the EYA is predicting, then this could have an extremely negative impact on child development and school readiness in areas where there is a shortage of early years places. Given that boroughs are predicting that smaller settings, often run by the VCS and in areas of

disadvantage, will be less likely to reopen, this could have a considerable impact in terms of widening inequalities.

4. The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employments or training

- London Councils has concerns about the impact of the lockdown on young people's mental health, particularly as they have been isolated from their peers and wider support networks, as well as routines, such as formal learning, for so long. This could have a wider impact in terms of increasing the number of young people who become NEET. In addition, if the pandemic leads to economic recession, there are likely to be less training and employment opportunities available for young people.
- Young people will need access to up-to-date good quality information advice and guidance on careers, through virtual means, to support them to make positive and appropriate decisions about their progression routes and that meets the needs of a changing London economy. Currently careers advice across London is patchy and there is a need for more resource and co-ordination to ensure young people have access to appropriate careers advice that can help them navigate their way through this challenging period.

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

- **the consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning**
- The London boroughs have been supporting their schools to communicate consistently and regularly with parents and pupils with home learning resources. Many local authorities in London have provided digital equipment to disadvantaged learners to ensure that they can make full use of their school's home learning resources. However, we have significant concerns about the impact that this digital divide will have on disadvantaged pupils in the long-term.
- **Children and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**
- The London boroughs are working with schools to support their pupils as much as possible to alleviate anxiety and other mental health issues induced by the social isolation imposed by lockdown. Boroughs are commissioning and signposting to digital mental health services, such as

Kooth and Shout and ThinkNinja which children and young people can access at home, and schools are disseminating wellbeing advice and information in communications to parents.

- However, for some children they will need additional support, for example through bereavement or trauma-informed therapies, once lockdown has ended. Local authorities are sharing approaches and working with schools to establish these services where appropriate and are offering webinars and additional training to school staff to support them in working with children and colleagues who have been bereaved. It will also be important for the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS to prioritise investment in CAMHS services so that adequate support is in place to support children and young people who develop more complex mental health needs.

6. The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

- COVID-19 continues to have a severe impact on apprenticeships. Whilst the additional flexibilities introduced by government are welcome, they have not been able to prevent a significant decline in apprenticeship provision. A survey of employers carried out by the Sutton Trust found that on average just 39% of apprenticeships were continuing as normal, with 36% having been furloughed and 8% made redundant. 17% of apprentices had their off-the job learning suspended, while lack of equipment and internet access has acted as a barrier to some apprentices accessing learning and working from home.
- London boroughs are themselves employers of apprentices, and they have been working hard during this period to keep their apprenticeship programmes up and running. Efforts have been made to ensure that apprentices can continue to learn and work from home, and some have been redeployed to other areas of the council. Boroughs have been providing pastoral support to their apprentices, particularly the most vulnerable such as care leavers. Problems have arisen where apprentices are nearing the end of their apprenticeship but are unable to complete their training. Most London boroughs have had to suspend recruitment of new apprentices.
- A protracted economic downturn will have a damaging impact on apprenticeships in the medium to long term. Around a third (31%) of employers surveyed by the Sutton Trust reported that they were likely to hire fewer apprentices over the coming year, or none at all. Taking on new apprentices will not be a priority for struggling businesses, and there will be less levy funding available as turnovers decline. Meanwhile the closure of schools and colleges is preventing young people from accessing the careers guidance that might lead to an apprenticeship, with the disadvantaged disproportionately affected. The Government needs to take steps to incentivise employers to take on apprenticeships in what will be very challenging economic circumstances. This should include introducing additional flexibilities to the apprenticeship levy, for example enabling employers to use a proportion of their levy for administration around apprenticeships and for pre-employment training.

7. The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

- London Councils has considerable concerns about the financial impact of closures on early years settings, particularly small, single-site providers who may not be able to reopen if appropriate levels of funding is not in place. Without Government funding to ease the transition to full capacity many of these providers will struggle to reopen.
- Schools have welcomed the additional funding made available to them to cope with the measures they need to put in place to open currently for vulnerable and key worker children, for example additional cleaning. However, many schools are struggling financially due to the lack of income for after school clubs. For many schools this income provides vital funds that may have already been allocated. Local authorities have also reported to us that schools are also experiencing financial pressure due to additional staffing costs incurred over the Easter holiday period, when schools remained open to key worker and vulnerable children, which cannot be recovered through the additional funding made available as a result of Covid-19.
- In London, the Adult Education Budget (AEB) is devolved to the Mayor. The GLA has swiftly put in place measures to maintain the financial stability for AEB grant providers and independent training providers until the end of this academic year. Some providers, particularly those with a higher dependence on income from learners, are likely to continue to face financial challenges. London's higher education sector has previously attracted large numbers of overseas students. Loss of income from these students is likely to have a disproportionate impact on the sector in London.

8. 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)

- There is considerable concern amongst the boroughs about the long term impact of Covid-19 and the closure of schools on disadvantaged pupils, particularly those pupils who do not have access to broadband and/or IT equipment in order to benefit from digital resources who may find that they have fallen behind their peers once schools have reopened fully.
- The impact on children and young people with SEND will vary depending on their types of need and family set up. Many boroughs and Special Schools have worked hard to support children with SEND at home during lockdown, but again the digital divide plays a part in exacerbating disadvantage. Many children and young people who attend special schools are on the shielded list and need to remain at home, which presents a different challenge for local authorities in how to support them appropriately. For many families with children with complex needs lockdown will be

considerably challenging and the boroughs recognise that it is vital that parents/carers are supported fully.

- For Children in Need the impact of lockdown and lack of contact time at school may be extremely detrimental. The boroughs are very concerned about the levels of hidden harm that may emerge following the reopening of schools. They have been working hard with children and their families who are already known to social workers. However, boroughs have serious concerns about the children and families that were just about coping before lockdown, who may now be struggling and come to their attention when lockdown eases.
- As part of the TfL bail-out deal that government has agreed with TfL, the concession which currently enables all children and young people under the age of 18 to travel free anywhere in London is expected to be removed. The removal of this concession pushes a significant financial burden on to local authorities who have a statutory duty to cover the travel costs for resident children who travel more than 2 miles to school if they are under 8 or more than 3 miles if they are under 16. London Councils is urging government to ensure that local authorities are fully funded to take on this administrative and financial burden. London Councils also has wider concerns about the impact that this change will have on the mobility of young people, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, who will be less likely to travel to access training and employment opportunities as well as sports and leisure activities if they have to pay for transport costs. This could exacerbate disadvantage at a time when many deprived young people have been struggling to keep up with their more affluent peers during lockdown due to the digital divide.

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

- Children's Services across London are undergoing a process of learning from the recent changes in practice during the Covid-19 pandemic to identify any key changes that have improved practice as well as understand what needs to be in place to improve resilience in the case of any future national emergency. This includes, for example, an increase in flexible working; and online contacts and meetings to reduce physical contact but maintain regular communications. This is still a live and emerging area.