



Recovery planning for Covid-19

Back to School

Introduction

The disruption children and young people have faced to their education during the pandemic has been extensive and will likely have profound consequences. Attainment and educational progress will have been affected, but so too will their social and emotional development.

As children begin to return to the classroom, schools will have a crucial role to play in both understanding, and responding to, the various impacts of the pandemic, such as the impact on mental health and well-being and the loss of learning accumulated over lockdown.

In this short briefing we set out a number of short, and longer term, actions that national Government, local authorities, and schools, could take to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children's lives and ensure that education systems are strengthened and made more resilient for the future.

This briefing is not exhaustive and should be read in conjunction with other briefings on recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic produced by the children's sector.

Ensuring children and young people are happy and healthy

Short-term recovery

As more children return to the classroom over the coming months, it is crucial that schools support them to be happy and healthy, and provide a nurturing environment in which to learn, rather than exclusively focusing on attainment.

As the Department for Education's guidance suggests, an initial focus on a range of more pastoral and enriching developmental activities, rather than solely academic achievement should be central to schools' re-opening plans. Providing pupils with a readjustment period will enable them to gradually transition back to learning, avoiding any undue pressure.

Children should also be given the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences of the past few months as a class, in small groups or individually with a trusted adult. These sessions could be aided by the new online resources for schools to improve mental health support for students.¹

Children should have the opportunity to have individual conversations with trusted adults and schools should provide safe, stable and nurturing relationships with their students, and work with students to develop a whole school approach to promoting and supporting well-being. The role of the Designated Safeguarding Lead, SENCO and senior mental health leads will be particularly important in ensuring schools provide support and links to external partners from Early Help, social care and mental health support.

The implementation of mandatory RSHE is an important opportunity for the Department for Education to provide support and materials to ensure that schools are fully equipped to support these conversations as they may provide an opportunity to identify a range of welfare needs – for example caring responsibilities, safeguarding concerns, mental health needs, relationship breakdown or domestic abuse, and poverty.

Alongside talking with pupils, schools should be available for conversations with parents and carers, where there are specific concerns, to understand their experiences, any worries they might have about the return to school, or additional support they may need.

The school environment will look significantly different as a range of protective measures are likely to remain in place to keep schools COVID-secure. Government guidance recommends that schools should communicate their plans to parents,² but schools should also look to communicate with children to ease any anxiety they may face, recognising Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of children's right to information. Some children may be particularly affected by these changes, such as those with special educational needs or existing mental health needs.

Children and young people must be given the time and space to re-establish their friendships, given the social isolation which they have experienced. In a recent survey, four out of five primary school pupils and three out of five secondary school pupils said that they are most looking forward to seeing their friends when they return to school³. More vulnerable pupils, like those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, may particularly struggle with the changes to routine and find re-integration more difficult. Young carers will need to balance the return to school with the changing caring needs of family members. Children who may have previously been bullied at school may not feel able to return as quickly as others and these children may need additional support and reassurance.

Close attention should be paid to unexpected and disrupted behaviours. These could be an indication of underlying needs and linked to difficulties caused by lockdown, especially if this change is out of character for the child. If not properly supported, this behaviour could lead to an increase in children being unfairly excluded from school. This is a particular risk for young people with SEND as the Government measures that weakened EHCP entitlements may have made it more difficult to access the support they need to effectively manage their behaviour.

Long-term recovery

In recognition of the traumatic nature of this pandemic, it will be more important than ever that schools, and all children's services are trauma informed. Schools must take a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing and also consider how they can best support the wellbeing of their staff and pupils.

It is vital that schools have access to high quality data to understand pupil's well-being. The Government should implement a national programme of well-being measurement, as it does for adults (and is already done for children in Wales), to support schools in understanding which individuals, year groups and demographics might need particular support.⁴

Long-term, children will need a range of high-quality services and support to meet their different well-being needs – whether they be around safeguarding concerns, mental health, parenting, financial hardship, or special educational needs or disabilities. The implementation of Mental Health Support Teams in trailblazer sites will provide additional mental health support to some schools but this is not available to all schools. In order to meet the range of well-being needs, the Government must rapidly scale up the capacity of early help

and well-being support available through/to schools. This can be achieved through ring-fenced funding and support for schools to fund additional staff in school support but also through closer working with local community and voluntary sector services.

We know the crisis may place additional pressures on specialist statutory services, such as NHS CYPMHS and children's social care, in the near future. Recommendations to respond to this are provided in the Safeguarding and Mental Health recovery briefings.

To support children effectively, it is crucial that staff in education settings are properly supported with their own well-being and given the opportunity to re-establish their own relationships. This should form part of a whole school approach to well-being, where staff receive the training and development necessary to understand their own, and children's, well-being so they can confidently support children and colleagues during the recovery period and over the longer term. We welcome the recent announcement of a well-being charter for teachers, which includes a commitment to measure staff well-being.⁵

Recommendations

In the short-term:

- The initial school timetable as pupils return to the classroom should focus on well-being and not solely on academic catch-up;
- Children will take some time to reintegrate back into school life and to re-establish friendships and routine. Children should be given the opportunity to talk about their experiences during the pandemic, both in groups and individual conversations. Parents and carers should also have an opportunity to share their experiences with school where necessary and appropriate. Unexpected behaviour should be seen as a form of communication, and disciplinary measures such as exclusions should be used as a last resort;
- Schools should review their joint working with statutory and community services to ensure they can access a range of support for young people.

In the long-term:

- The Department for Education should provide schools with support to implement RSE and Health education and provide guidance to teachers to deliver the new curriculum as part of a whole school approach.
- The Department for Education should establish a national programme of well-being measurement for children and young people.
- The Department for Education should provide additional ring-fenced funding to schools and local authorities to ensure early help services are available to help meet any needs that have arisen during the crisis.
- Schools should draw on the support offered by the Department for Education to ensure that they are properly supporting the well-being of their staff.

Ensuring children and young people are safe

Short-term recovery

For some children, school is their only place of safety.⁶ Lockdown has likely exacerbated some risks to children including domestic abuse, online grooming, and recruitment into criminal exploitation or child sexual exploitation. Where schools have not already done so it is vital that they fully engage with their multiagency safeguarding partnerships to understand their local safeguarding structures, processes and analysis of their local population.

Before children return to classrooms, schools should review the needs of all children and young people known to the Designated Safeguarding Lead. Although some of these children will have been in school during the pandemic, we know many have chosen to stay at home, with only 18% of vulnerable children eligible to be at school attending in May.⁷ The SENCO or DSL should reach out to these children and young people and families, assess their needs and well-being, work closely with other agencies, and encourage and motivate these children and young people to come back to school when appropriate for them and their family. This should be backed by strong teacher-child relationships as students return.

Schools must also work closely with local authorities to ensure the school roll is up to date and children missing from education are identified and supported. There should be a particular focus on children who were missing from education before the pandemic and children who were excluded from school prior to lockdown, as they are at additional risk of going missing, trafficking, criminal exploitation, abuse and neglect. Attention should also be paid to new reception cohorts starting school for the first time to ensure they attend and do not drop-off.

Schools should review their safeguarding procedures, and provide a refresher of training, taking into account the risks that children and young people may have been exposed to as a result of the lockdown. This could be done, for example, by providing training around criminal and sexual exploitation, trafficking and the National Referral Mechanism. Schools could also use this as an opportunity to review and update their safeguarding policy.

Long-term recovery

As more children return to school, schools must prepare for an increased number of safeguarding disclosures from children and young people. Schools should work with local authority children's services to put in place plans on how to manage increased referrals. Children's social care must also be supported and properly funded following the crisis to meet the expected rise in safeguarding referrals – more information on how this should happen is outlined in the Safeguarding recovery briefing.

Research conducted in 2013 found that 90% of children had a negative experience when disclosing abuse or neglect, mostly when the person they shared with responded poorly.⁸ As trusted adults, it is important that all school staff have the skills to respond to safeguarding disclosures. This includes the confidence to act on any clues and ask sensitive but direct questions, rather than waiting for a child to explicitly describe something which they may not have the words for. The NSPCC has produced a [framework for disclosure](#) for professionals. This should be covered in any updated safeguarding training that is provided to staff.

Recommendations

In the short-term, schools should:

- Make contact with families and review support for children currently known to the Designated Safeguarding Lead;
- Use trusted relationships to encourage vulnerable children to return to school if it is in their best interests;
- Work with their local authority to identify children who are missing from education;
- Review safeguarding training and policies to respond to growing threats like online harms, exploitation and trafficking;

In the long-term:

- The Department for Education's 'Actions for Schools' Guidance should state clearly the duties of schools and local authorities during the coronavirus lockdown towards young people missing from school to monitor and follow up with families. In the long-term, the Government should act on the proposals in the 2019 "Children not in School" consultation and create an obligation for schools and local authorities to keep a record of unexplained school exits and monitor these.

- To prepare for the anticipated increase in safeguarding disclosures as more children return to school, schools should provide support for staff to effectively support children through safeguarding disclosures.

Learning and attainment

Short-term recovery

Widespread school closures have had, and will continue to have, a marked impact on children's academic outcomes and will serve to further increase the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Children themselves express anxiety about academic inequality, with 18% of students in a recent survey identifying that they were worried about falling behind at school.⁹

Supporting pupil well-being is crucial to children and young people's attainment. Evidence suggests that improvements in psychosocial wellbeing are related to improved academic outcomes.¹⁰ Creating a positive and holistic environment with a focus on socioemotional learning is therefore important for ensuring children are able to catch-up on lost learning. Further details are outlined in the above 'Happy and Healthy' section of the briefing.

Long-term recovery

School closures will still have resulted in significant gaps in learning for many pupils, particularly the poorest and most disadvantaged. Low-income families, responding to a recent survey, were twice as likely to say they lacked all the resources they needed to support learning at home, with 40 per cent saying they were missing at least one essential resource.¹¹ Statistics from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) support this, with data showing that 'Children from better-off families are spending 30% more time on home learning than are those from poorer families.'¹²

It will be critical for schools and teachers to be empowered and provided with the resources to identify these pupils and support their learning. The recent announcement of a £1 billion 'catch-up package for schools across England is welcome and recognises the huge efforts needed to ensure that children are not left behind in the recovery period. The National Tutoring Programme will focus on the most disadvantaged children, aiming to prevent the attainment gap from widening. This is a welcome focus.

However, further guidance needs to be produced, setting out for schools how they can use the fund. It is vital that schools are allowed flexibility to not only spend the money on academic catch-up, but also on mental health and well-being support to meet the specific needs of pupils.

Whilst this 'catch up package' is for primary and secondary schools, it does not include support for early years and post-16 education. The Government must address this gap in the support package and set out plans for early years and post-16 catch up.

Details of the summer catch-up plan for all pupils have not yet been released, but the Government has set out its ambition that this will include holiday clubs and activities for children over the summer.

It is critical that any additional catch-up learning is non-mandatory, child-centred, flexible and offers a diverse range of activities. Summer provision must avoid creating stigma for children who experienced learning loss by being offered on a universal basis, but be sensitively targeted at those who could benefit from it most. Wherever possible, school buildings should be made available for this as these are the most familiar and accessible places for children. The programmes should be delivered in ways that will help overcome any digital disadvantage that young people may have faced due to lack of internet or hardware access. However, summer programmes must be properly funded by the Government and should not be paid for out of school budgets.

The need to catch-up will be particularly acute for children at key transition points, such as those entering Year 7, those starting GCSEs in Year 10, and those entering sixth form or college in Year 12. There will also

be implications for those students in Year 11 and 13 who have missed exams. The DfE should work with schools as soon as possible to understand what additional support can be given to these pupils. This includes in relation to any extraordinary measures being prepared ahead of GCSE and A-Level exams in spring 2021 (in consultation with Ofqual) and to those students who have missed exams.

Additional support will be required for pupils with additional needs, such as those with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND) and looked after children. For the former, the Department for Education should consider providing additional resources for schools to update Education and Health Care (EHC) plans and implement additional academic support. The DfE should also work with Virtual Schools to review learning plans for looked after children, assessing what additional academic or pastoral support may be required following Coronavirus to support their learning.

One potential positive outcome of the pandemic is better use of online learning. The potential of a second wave, and further school closures, means that schools need to ensure that all children have the equipment they need to learn at home. Government, and schools, should review what worked well during the pandemic to inform improved digital support and learning in the long term. There should be particular emphasis on inclusion, accessibility, privacy and data security and on staff training and skills to deliver learning online.

Recommendations

In the short-term:

- Schools should adopt a whole-school approach to well-being to create an enabling environment for academic learning;
- In line with the Children in Need Review the Department for Education must place a particular focus on how best to support the attainment of pupils facing adversity through a greater focus on emotional wellbeing and providing tailored help.

In the long-term:

- The Government should set out further guidance on the Coronavirus 'Catch-up Package' and should enable schools to use this for mental health and well-being support, as well as academic catch-up. The Government should also urgently address the gap in support for early years, PRU's, secure accommodation, children in hospital, and post-16 provision;
- Provide additional guidance and support for students at key transition points;
- Work with Ofqual to undertake and implement necessary arrangements for 2021 exams to prevent students experiencing lost learning due to school closures from being unfairly disadvantaged;
- Provide guidance and financial support for schools to support lost learning for particular groups, including children with EHC plans and looked after children;
- Ensure any guidance around summer school provision is flexible, child-centred, non-stigmatising and non-mandatory for children to attend;
- The Government should conduct a national review of the experience of providing online learning during the pandemic to identify key challenges and opportunities and develop plans for a more resilient future.

Financial Hardship and Poverty

Short-term recovery

Research suggests that school closures are having a significant impact on some families, particularly those who have experienced a sudden drop in income and those with children eligible for free school meals (FSM). The Coronavirus pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on households with children, with '39% of parents reported having their household finances affected compared to only 22% of non-parents'.¹³

To prepare for children returning to the classroom, local authorities should support schools by providing comprehensive information about local welfare and other financial support that is available locally to help families who are struggling financially. This should include information about benefits and welfare rights advice, local welfare assistance schemes, school uniform grants and other local support (such as food banks) available for financially vulnerable families.

The extension of FSM provision over the summer holidays will be a lifeline for many families who have relied on this entitlement during the crisis. However, we encourage the Government to consider providing this entitlement as a direct payment to families as this method allows choice, dignity, safety and convenience, all of which are valued by families receiving FSM replacements.¹⁴

We welcome that families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) who are eligible for FSM, can temporarily access that entitlement. This extension should not be removed when children return to school in September and should be made permanent. We recommend school leadership provide information for staff so they understand the condition and the ways to support families who have it attached to their immigration status. Schools should make the family aware of their right to challenge the condition and signpost them to immigration advice to do so.

Long-term recovery

As children return to the classroom, schools should offer universal advice and guidance for parents about support for financial hardship. This should include activity to promote and improve uptake of FSM. It is particularly crucial that in the initial months after returning to school the cost of the school day is kept as low as possible. School uniform policies should be reviewed to ensure they are not prohibitively expensive and children without the correct uniform should be treated with sensitivity. Extra-curricular activities should be inclusive and without additional cost to families.

The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide. The sudden closure of schools meant that schools have had to respond quickly to provide learning through digital platforms to children and young people in their homes. For pupils without access to digital devices or those with limited or no access to the internet, it has often been more difficult to engage with online learning.¹⁵

Moving forward, it is crucial that digital exclusion is treated as a significant priority particularly in the light of a possible new spike in Covid-19 infection. Whilst the Government has taken steps to address this by providing 4G routers and digital devices to the most disadvantaged pupils, there has been a lack of clarity as to whether this will be continued into the summer to support summer catch-up plans and longer-term as more pupils return to school. It is crucial that this scheme is continued post-pandemic to ensure that all pupils have equal access to education, and the Government needs to clarify its plans on this. We therefore welcome calls to extend the provision of broadband connection and digital devices to all children in receipt of FSM.

Recommendations

In the short-term:

- Schools should provide information for staff so they understand the condition of NRPF, ways to support families who have it attached to their immigration status, and can make the family aware of their right to challenge the condition and signpost them to immigration advice to do so.
- Schools should offer universal advice and guidance for parents and carers about support for financial hardship and help them to access their full entitlements from the local council e.g. FSM or local welfare schemes;

In the long-term

- Schools should review uniform policies to relieve pressures on families facing hardship and prevent pupils from being disciplined as a result of their financial circumstances;

- Schools should ensure extracurricular activities, and other school activities with costs associated, are accessible to all students as they will play a big role in helping to rebuild friendships;
- The Department for Education should introduce a permanent scheme to ensure that all children in receipt of FSMs – and others growing up in low-income households but not eligible for FSM - have access to broadband internet and appropriate IT hardware to participate in school learning from home and complete homework.

Thinking about the future

The Coronavirus pandemic, while unprecedented, is unlikely to be the last disruption to education children will face, in particular as there is a realistic probability of a second wave of this pandemic. As such, the lessons from lockdown, both good and bad, should be used to improve future responses to short or long-term school closures. Importantly, good practice or lessons learned can also be used to improve the delivery of education on a day-to-day basis. Innovative practices, recognition of new and additional safeguarding concerns, and the role of schools in supporting mental health and wellbeing have all been crystallised by the crisis.

In order to build back better and learn from the pandemic, all education stakeholders should come together to consider:

- How to improve resilience and contingency planning,
- How to ensure children have equal digital access to facilitate home learning,
- How to improve schools' ability to safeguard children remotely,
- How to ensure well-being of staff and pupils is a priority,
- How to deliver home learning effectively with equal access to the whole curriculum for all.

We encourage the DfE to facilitate a comprehensive and inclusive review of the impact of lockdown on education, shaped by the voices of children, parents and carers, teachers and other school staff, charities supporting children and families, unions and the Department.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-mental-health-support-for-pupils-and-teachers>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/reopening-schools-and-other-educational-settings-from-1-june>

³ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/The-cost-of-learning-in-lockdown-UK-FINAL_0.pdf

⁴ <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/impact-and-innovation/research-impact/school-health-research-network>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/extra-mental-health-support-for-pupils-and-teachers>

⁶ Office for National Statistics (January 2020) *Child abuse extent and nature, England and Wales: year ending March 2019*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/childabuseextentandnatureenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019>

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892528/Attendance_during_the_coronavirus_COVID-19_outbreak_summary_of_returns_to_11_June.pdf

⁸ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2013/no-one-noticed-no-one-heard>

⁹ Unicef UK, First News survey

¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c70058140f0b603de07e331/475_MHPSS_and_SEL_support_for_learning_outcomes_in_conflict-affected_settings.pdf

¹¹ https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/The-cost-of-learning-in-lockdown-UK-FINAL_0.pdf

¹² <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

¹³ <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/families-hit-harder-because-nothing-children-covid-19-response>

¹⁴ <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/cost-learning-lockdown-family-experiences-school-closures>

¹⁵ Ibid.