



Delivering a Coronavirus recovery that works for children – summary and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the lives of every child and young person in the country. Our organisations are calling for a new vision of childhood to support children, young people and their families to recover from the impact of COVID-19.

We need a cross-government approach that considers the needs of children, young people and their families in the round, from conception to age 25. The voices of children, young people and families must be at the heart of the recovery process, and there must be renewed investment in the services and workforce that they rely on.

This does not simply mean a plan for return to “business as usual” – which was already failing far too many children. Instead, a new vision of childhood is needed to support children, young people and their families to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Such an approach needs to adhere to the following [principles](#):

- *Take an integrated and holistic approach*
- *Protect and promote children’s rights and entitlements.*
- *Treat children, young people and their families as partners*
- *Have an explicit focus on reducing inequalities – including addressing the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups, and on children in poverty.*
- *Invest in children and young people’s futures through a comprehensive, long-term funding settlement*
- *Understand how needs have changed and respond*
- *Value and invest in the workforce*
- *Value strong relationships and take a person-centred approach to new models of service delivery*

Experts from across the children’s sector have been working closely together to produce the set of briefings summarised below. These briefings build on these principles to begin to set out an approach to delivering a recovery which works for children across six key areas - child poverty and social security; mental health and wellbeing; early years recovery; supporting children in care and care leavers; safeguarding and child protection; and school returns. There is much still to do but we hope this helps make a start.

A selection of key recommendations are included in the summary text, however, a full list of recommendations from the six briefings can also be found [here](#). The full briefings can be found at the links in the text.

Child Poverty and Social Security

The coronavirus crisis has made life much harder for low-income households, those already living in insecure housing and at risk of homelessness, and those with precarious immigration status. Even before the pandemic hit, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK – making up 30% of all children in the country. Many families were already vulnerable to income shocks, following a decade of sustained cuts to social security support.

Growing up in poverty restricts a young person's life chances, from affecting their well-being to their educational attainment and future life chances. The coronavirus crisis has no doubt exacerbated these impacts of child poverty, which has steadily increased over the past four years, pushing many families to breaking point. As government, schools and communities have attempted to support children and families through the changing crisis, emerging issues around the digital divide and children's access to learning, the number of families living in unsuitable accommodation, and the already-precarious financial situation of many families has highlighted how deep levels of disadvantage run within our society.

The government has acted quickly to protect people's livelihoods during the pandemic, through initiatives like the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, which have helped to safeguard millions of people's jobs. However, apart from the national Free School Meals voucher scheme, there has been no additional support directly for children and families. Furthermore, as these schemes begin to wind down over the coming months, more families will turn to the social security system for support as they struggle with loss of earnings, school closures, potential threats of eviction and homelessness, and poor health.

It is critical that the government invests in social security, housing and crisis provision to ensure that families are adequately supported through this period of post-Covid recovery. In the short term, this means:

- Extending the social security safety net for children and families by investing in a £10 per week uplift in child benefit, and in the child elements of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit.
- Removing the benefit cap and the two-child limit.
- Improving the Free School Meal system by providing more support for newly eligible parents to register for Free School Meals.
- Suspending No Recourse to Public Funds conditions without further delay so that all families can access the lifeline of social security.
- Strengthening legal protections against eviction and homelessness due to Covid-19 by scrapping Section 21 'no fault' evictions, and temporarily suspending the use of Section 8 (Housing Act 1998) evictions or making it a discretionary, rather than mandatory, ground for eviction.
- urgently making a funding allocation of £250 million to higher-tier local authorities in England for delivering emergency financial support through "Local Welfare Assistance" schemes in the year 2020/21.

In the longer term:

- The government should conduct a review of the social security system, as part of a broader child poverty strategy
- The government should review Free School Meal provision with a view to extending eligibility to capture working families who currently fall outside of the maximum income thresholds
- Government should ensure that children and homeless families are not placed in accommodation that is harmful to their health and wellbeing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

The coronavirus pandemic will have far-reaching consequences babies', children and young people's mental health. Before the pandemic, one in eight children and young people aged 5-19 in England had a diagnosable mental health condition. The pandemic will have posed serious challenges to the mental health of these young people but there is

also growing evidence that lockdown has had a much wider impact on children's mental health that could have long term implications.

Any recovery planning that takes place must encourage integrated, local approaches, working across early years settings, schools, NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) and the voluntary and community sector. At the centre of this response should be the experiences and voices of children, young people and their families.

Early mental health and development relies on secure, responsive parent-infant relationships. Mothers and fathers who have faced birth and new parenthood under lockdown have also experienced particular stress at a key transitional point in their life, with reduced support available such as from health visitor services and children's centres.

As children return to school, the primary focus of the recovery curriculum should be on promoting well-being and successful re-integration, rather than solely focusing on academic achievement. Adopting a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing will be more important than ever in this context.

For young people aged 16 and over, transitions are a major feature in their lives whether it's transitioning into college, university, employment or into adult mental health services. We know that transitions for this age group can be particularly tricky and that existing support mechanisms are not always effective. During the pandemic, issues around transitions have been exacerbated.

Addressing children's mental health and wellbeing must be at the heart of the Government's recovery plans. In the short term this means:

- DfE, DHSC, Public Health England and the NHS should work together to urgently publish and update guidance and resources which equips parents and practitioners with the knowledge, skills and confidence to support emotional well-being and mental health in children under five
- All routine health visiting contacts with families should be reinstated as soon as possible to enable contact with families and assessment of children's needs.
- The Government must allow schools flexibility with the curriculum to ensure schools can focus on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils. The summer catch up scheme must include a focus on mental health and well-being, alongside activities to support students catching up academically.
- NHS CYPMHS services should continue to provide support to those young people who should be transitioning to AMHS until the recovery period is over and face to face assessments and planning can take place.

In the longer term:

- The Government must take concerted, cross-system action with clear leadership, to protect and promote the emotional health and wellbeing of young children, underpinned by sufficient resources.
- The Government should take this opportunity to review the role of the wider education system on staff and pupil wellbeing, and provide additional ring-fenced funding to schools and local authorities to rapidly scale up the capacity of early mental health and wellbeing support to meet the expected increase in demand
- The ambition for NHS CYPMHS to support young people up to the age of 25 is progressed with urgency across the country, and that implementation is monitored.

Early Years recovery

Pregnancy and the early years are a critical time for both child development and family wellbeing. Stable, supportive environments and positive interactions during this period play a unique role in shaping a child's brain, with long-term consequences for health and wellbeing, as well as educational attainment.

We are concerned that the secondary impact of the pandemic will have a significant adverse effect on babies, born and unborn, who are experiencing this crisis at a particularly critical stage in their development, and will also have an impact on the wellbeing and development of 2-4 year olds. Families who were already experiencing multiple adversities may find that problems have intensified during COVID-19, but they are now unable to access the same level of support from family and friends. At the same time, they may be unable to access the same level of professional support through community, health visiting and specialist services. For other families, the extraordinary circumstances that have arisen from this pandemic will create new hardships and vulnerabilities which may not be readily identified by professionals given government guidance on social distancing.

Many young children have also not had their usual access to playgrounds, outdoor space, toddler groups, early education and childcare settings and children centres. This may have negatively impacted on the wellbeing and development of some children, particularly those from more disadvantaged families living in overcrowded accommodation, without garden access nor the material or digital resources to facilitate play and learning at home.

As we come out of this pandemic, undetected needs will emerge and the current level of available support is unlikely to meet increased demand. There will be significant challenges associated with resuming full face-to-face community, health and social care services due to the inevitable backlog of missed contacts as well as the contacts that must be repeated because full assessments weren't able to take place digitally. A range of educational, socioeconomic and health inequalities will therefore likely be exacerbated, and digital inequalities mean that families who may benefit the most from early intervention might lose out.

It is more important than ever that post COVID-19 we reset our early years priorities and build back better. For successive years there have been significant reductions in funding which undermine the ability of the system to both tackle inequalities in early years support and to improve outcomes for all children. We must ensure all of our existing and future early years' provision is sufficiently underpinned by what we know from the evidence on child development; the needs of parents; best practice around engaging parents; and is fully resourced to enable all families to give babies and young children the best start in life.

In the short term this means:

- The Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England, Public Health England and the Department for Education to provide clear guidance and best practice for early years services across health, early education, social care and voluntary sector services on how they can swiftly and safely return to offering high-quality face to face support to families.
- Health visitors must be fully financially resourced and supported to enable them to re-institute face to face contacts for families. There must also be capacity to address needs as they are identified, through a coherent pathway of support to more tailored and specialised services.
- Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care should develop a mental health support package for the early education and childcare sector to mirror the support package being offered to schools, colleges and their pupils.
- The Treasury must urgently commit to additional short-term funding for the early education and childcare sector to make sure all children, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged can access (1) their early education entitlements; and (2) a summer programme so children can catch-up on their emotional security and personal, social and emotional development, as the foundation of learning.

In the longer term:

- The early years must become an explicit, cross-system priority through a commitment to developing a single, cross-government Children's Recovery Strategy, starting in the first 1001 days. A key pillar of this must be a fully resourced, trained and valued early years workforce.
- This will require long-term investment across the full range of early years services.
- The modernisation of the Healthy Child Programme should extend the current mandated five health visitor reviews with additional reviews, in line with the rest of the UK, where the value of a robust and fully resourced health visiting service has been accepted.
- Government should allocate additional Early Years Pupil Premium for 'COVID-19 catch-up' programmes focused on communication and language and emotional wellbeing.

School returns

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 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.

At the same time, it must be recognised that widespread school closures have had, and will continue to have, a marked impact on children's academic outcomes and are likely to further increase the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. Those facing financial hardship may have faced particular difficulties with engaging with education during lockdown, and may now face barriers to reengaging with schools as they open. 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.

For some children, school is their only place of safety. 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.

A safe school return is key for a recovery that works for children. This has to include support for students' mental health and wellbeing, a focus on addressing educational inequalities, and a robust approach to keeping children safe. In the short term this means:

- 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.
- 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;
- 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.
- Support for children currently known to the Designated Safeguarding Lead should be reviewed;
- Schools should work with their local authority to identify children who are missing from education;

In the longer 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 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;
- 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.
- 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;

[Supporting children in care and care leavers](#)

On March 31 2019 there were 78,150 children in care in England and 26,990 care leavers aged between 19 and 21 years old. Whilst the majority of children in care live with foster families, some of the most vulnerable live in children's homes or unregulated accommodation, and more than 4 in 10 are placed outside of their home local authority. Care leavers are also a uniquely disadvantaged group, beginning their adult lives without the networks of support which many of us take for granted. The majority of children become looked after due to abuse or neglect within the family.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of care experienced young people, with many of them feeling more than ever isolated and worried about their future. It has also brought into sharp focus a number of existing shortcomings in the care system.

For example, the number of children in care not able to access mental health services when needed is a long-standing and serious issue. The COVID-19 pandemic is creating additional anxiety and uncertainty as well as making it more difficult for those with existing mental health needs to access support.

COVID-19 has also become an additional factor contributing to placement breakdowns. Practitioners working directly with young people report that some children in care and care leavers have been struggling with adherence to social distancing requirements, particularly, in placements that young people did not feel positive about.

Since the onset of COVID-19, children and young people have also reported problems they are encountering contacting children's social care services, including social workers/PAs not responding to calls or visiting young people less frequently, and sending text messages rather than having conversation on the phone. In some cases, social workers/PAs have refused to support children and young people with problems they are facing – it is often unclear whether this is due to lack of capacity or other reasons.

Delivering effective support for children and young people in and leaving care, is a key responsibility of any decent society, and their interests must be central to a COVID-19 recovery plan. In the short term this means:

- The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI445) must expire on 25 September 2020. Plans must be put in place backed with appropriate investment to build the capacity of the care system to respond to the needs of children at all times.
- A “back to education” plan for children in care should be produced, and existing Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) funds and newly-announced ‘catch-up’ funding should be used on targeted support for this group of children.
- Support for children in care should become a key part of the announced extra mental health support in schools and bespoke mental health assessment and support package for children in care should be extended across the country. Trauma informed approaches should underpin support children in care receive.
- Schools and colleges must work closely with Virtual School Heads, designated teachers and other social care professionals to ensure any exam grade predictions submitted are fair.

In the longer term, this means:

- **Putting children's interests, wishes and experiences at the heart of the Care Review.** The work on addressing the current shortcomings in the care system should start without any further delays. The review should be independent, evidence-based, given sufficient time and resource with cross-government commitment, and have lived experience at its centre.
- **Better support for care leavers:** ban eviction from unregulated accommodation, make discretionary payments accessible for all; introduce country-wide council tax exemption for care leavers; ensure access to Discretionary Housing payment or one off grants; and extend priority need for housing to care leavers.

Safeguarding and child protection

Even prior to the pandemic there were concerns that the safeguarding system was ‘overstretched and overwhelmed’ and unable to meet the growing safeguarding pressures, brought about by: persistent cuts to local authority budgets – by £2.2 billion since 2010; increasing levels of hardship faced by families; growing understanding of, and responsiveness to, sexual and criminal exploitation of children; as well as increases in the number of adolescents with complex needs coming to attention of services.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic raises considerable additional concerns about the wellbeing and safety of children. For example, there are concerns that the current lockdown is placing children at increased risk of domestic abuse. The number of domestic homicides is far higher than the average rate for the time of year, and contacts to NSPCC's Helpline about children experiencing domestic abuse increased by 10% during the lockdown period.

Anecdotal evidence from practitioners on the ground suggest the COVID-19 pandemic is also resulting in changing patterns of how children are trafficked and exploited. While some young people might have been more visible to police during the lockdown period, there are also reports that criminal groups adapted how they are trafficking children between different locations.

At the same time, there are concerns about diminishing support systems for children at risk and parents under stress during the crisis, including practical and emotional support from members of their wider family and friends network; closure of face to face community and voluntarily based support and therapeutic services during the crisis and limitations in their capacity to operate even remotely due to practical and funding constraints going forward.

Participation in education and extra-curricular activities makes children 'visible' to services, with a high number of new referrals made to children's services coming from education settings. There is a concern that with schools, early year provision, colleges and some PRUs closed for the majority of children, opportunities for teachers and other professionals to identify and support children who face abuse, neglect, exploitation are more limited, which may lead to escalation of risks for some children or new risks presenting in lives of children.

Instead, as children have spent more time at home the role of social media and online platforms as played an important role in communication, education and entertainment. While this interconnectedness has many important benefits, the lack of safeguards means that it also presents risks to children. In April 2020, there were over 4 million reports to National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), four times the recorded rate in April 2019.

COVID-19 has created new concerns for keeping children safe, including by placing additional stress on families and increasing concerns about online harms. It has also brought into sharp focus a number of existing shortcomings in the child welfare system. An effective recovery plan must focus on keeping children safe both now and in the future. In the short term this means:

- Local safeguarding partnerships should be supported to put in place local recovery plans mapping the key impacts of COVID-19 on keeping children safe in their areas and specifying actions to address those.
- For those transitioning between educational settings, it must be ensured that their new education place is aware of any additional safeguarding or support needs children and families have.

In the longer term this means:

- A comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan for vulnerable children is needed backed with appropriate long-term investment to stabilise the system and to rebalance spending towards high-quality preventative services.
- The government should commit to having a world-leading Online Harms Act on the statute book within 18 months to address the existing weaknesses in online platform moderation and their poor design choices leading to greater risks of child online exploitation.
- As a result of COVID-19 many important policy developments have been delayed. This work must continue now without any further delay with the Government setting an ambitious timetable for legislative and policy changes to address online harms and improve responses to children experiencing domestic abuse, sexual or criminal exploitation, violence or those who go missing.