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Introduction

In *Rethinking Local*, we highlighted that when it comes to COVID-19 and the country's recovery, the real challenge for children's services is yet to come. We don't yet know the full impact of the pandemic on children, young people and their families, but councils across the country are expecting a significant increase in demand for services as we move into the next phase. That pressure will come from referrals that would normally have been made when children were being seen regularly by professionals, but who disappeared from view for months; from increased need for family, child and adolescent support, including as a result of domestic abuse and isolation through lockdown; and from the strain on families as they try to cope with mental health challenges, job losses, substance misuse problems, bereavements and more as a result of the pandemic.

Schools are also going to be under significant pressure as they work to put children's mental wellbeing at the forefront while helping children to get their learning back on track. They will likely face challenges with ensuring young people return to school, settling children back into routines, supporting children through pandemic-related anxieties, managing behaviour and re-establishing the relationships that enable children to flourish. Councils will be working closely with schools to support them through this time, from local support through the "Wellbeing for Education Return" programme to coordinating home to school transport and ensuring all children can safely get to school.

Councils and the Government will need to work swiftly to deal with the immediate challenges to children, young people and their families if we are to avoid long-term damage to their prospects. In particular, supporting families through the next stages of the pandemic, our recovery and the potential long shadow of lockdown impacts will be key to helping our communities to get back on their feet. We need to make sure mental health support is available, for both children and adults, that local safety nets are properly resourced and well organised to avoid families falling into crisis, and that actions are put in place to avoid the disadvantage gap widening any further. There is a real risk that the impact of the pandemic will fall harder on those children already at a disadvantage, whether economically or socially, and considering those needs will be vital.

This publication is in three parts. In the first, we outline the immediate challenges as a result of the pandemic and what we need to do to tackle them. In the second, we consider how councils and the Government can implement more child-centred approaches to policy and decision-making, to make sure that children are at the heart – for all of our benefit. And the third looks at the challenges we face in the longer-term to deliver the great places to grow up that children need and deserve.

An area that works for children and young people works for everyone. It has the services that help families to thrive – whether that's family support groups and outstanding childcare, or adult social care services that mean grandparents can stay local or in their homes for longer. It has the good homes we want our children to grow up in, and for our young people to move into when the time comes. It nurtures the jobs market needed to encourage young people to stay in the area and provides training that enables people of all ages to take advantage of opportunities. Local planning ensures everyone has access to green space for health and recreation, accessible town centres and good transport to access jobs and amenities. It protects the environment for the next generation. It creates opportunity for all.

Putting children and young people at the heart of recovery planning isn't about excluding other services. It's about drawing together every aspect of policy and service delivery to create the places people want to live in and plan for the future.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immeasurable impact on all of us, and councils have been at the forefront of local responses since day one. As we move into the next phase of the pandemic, thoughts are turning towards recovery and what that will look like given the significant uncertainties still facing us.

The main challenges for children's services are yet to come. As children return to school, and as the full, long-term impact of the pandemic becomes apparent, councils anticipate a sharp increase in demand for everything from universal support services through to urgent child protection responses. Councils will also be working closely with schools to support children as they return, and to coordinate wider education system responses such as changes to home to school transport.

Children's services were already under strain prior to the pandemic, with those pressures exacerbated by COVID-19. In order to recover, we need to not only address the immediate impacts of the pandemic, but tackle existing issues to build resilient services that can properly meet the needs of children and families. This document outlines our ambition for a child-centred recovery at both a local and a national level, and our asks of the Government to support councils and their partners in delivering local areas that are great places to grow up.

Our immediate priorities:

- 1. A cross-Whitehall strategy that puts children and young people at the heart of recovery.**
- 2. Investment in local safety nets and the universal and early help services, including mental health and wellbeing services, that children, young people and their families will need to support them through the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic.**
- 3. Dedicated action to prevent the attainment gap from widening.**

Putting children's rights and voices at the centre

Councils have responsibilities under the Children Act 1989 and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) to ensure children are able to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have those views taken seriously.

We want to see both local authorities and the Government considering how all decision-making can be framed through a child-focused lens, to put their needs at the heart of new policies and legislation. A town, city, region or country that works for children and young people works for everyone, supporting inclusive communities and safe, welcoming places to live and visit.

We outline in this document ways in which councils can incorporate the voices of children and young people into their decision-making, and feedback from young people themselves. We also highlight the ways in which the pandemic may have had a different impact on different groups of young people, emphasising the importance of considering children and young people as individuals – and not a homogeneous group.

Children's services

Children's services exist not only to keep vulnerable children safe, but to make sure that every child has the opportunity to thrive. As grants to councils have been cut, and the need for child protection work has increased, many children's services departments have been forced to cut back the universal and early help services that can help all children, young people and their families to thrive.

As the wider impacts of the pandemic become apparent, these services will be more important than ever to help families to get through difficult periods. Contextual, transitional and relational safeguarding are helpful tools to make sure children are safe, working with the whole family and taking into account the child or young person's life context to make sure the right support is found at the right time. It is vital that councils are properly resourced to enable investment in preventative universal and early help services so that children, young people and their families can get the practical, emotional, educational and mental health support they need, as soon as they need it – and before problems escalate.

The number of children in care has been rising each year and may well increase further as a result of the pandemic. Suitable placements for children are already under pressure, especially for those with complex or challenging needs. The Government's review of the children's care system was understandably paused to allow capacity to tackle the challenges of national lockdown; we now need this review to begin as soon as possible to start making the changes needed to best support and protect our most vulnerable children. However, work on improving placement sufficiency cannot wait until the conclusion of that review. We are ready to work with the Government on this issue to make sure children have the right homes for their needs.

Surveys of young people through the pandemic have repeatedly revealed real concerns about the future, with complications around examination results generating further anxiety and analysis indicating that young people may be worst affected by pandemic-related job losses. Concerns have also been raised about the likelihood of young people becoming more vulnerable and being drawn into youth violence or being criminally exploited. Youth workers can play a key role in supporting young people through difficult periods, providing the trusted relationships and advice that can be the difference between being supported to make positive choices and being drawn into more negative situations. However investment in youth services has fallen significantly as money has been directed towards urgent child protection work; this is an area the Government will need to invest in if it wishes to support positive outcomes for a generation hit particularly hard by the recent crisis.

Education

Schools have worked throughout the pandemic to support children both with their education and their wellbeing, while the relationships between schools and councils have flourished. As we move towards recovery, it's important that these relationships are not lost. The important role of councils in a school-led education system needs to be recognised, with powers and funding provided to enable them to continue playing that role effectively.

The pandemic has also highlighted the important role of councils, schools and healthcare partners in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, and the challenges in fulfilling that role in the current system. We have been clear with the Government that the SEND review currently underway needs to create a clear accountability framework and allow flexibility around funding, while supporting councils to deliver the special school places children need.

Education isn't just about statutory school age – it's about making sure children are school-ready, and can continue learning when they leave school. Good quality early education and proper careers advice and post-16 training options provide the essential bookends to a child's time in school to make the most of statutory education, contributing to improved social mobility and levelling up across the country. Proper funding is vital, as is clarity of vision for the delivery of these services and making sure different funding streams are working as hard as they can.

Wider support

A child-centred recovery is about far more than services directly responsible for children and young people. Children deserve to grow up in good quality, stable homes, in safe areas offering positive long-term opportunities, with good access to the services they need.

Health services will play an important role both in the immediate future and longer term. Short-term recovery plans, along with plans for a potential 'second-wave' or local lockdowns, must consider the health of babies and children, from ensuring health visitors can carry out their essential work to catching up on missed vaccinations and dental appointments. Surveys have also indicated that some children have struggled with their mental wellbeing through the pandemic; with children's mental health services already under enormous strain, we cannot wait any longer to properly invest in these services to help children to be mentally well.

We also need to make sure that families have access to secure homes – especially as the recession takes hold and people's jobs may be at risk. And we encourage the Government and local areas to work together to ensure there is a good local safety net to support families through what may be a very difficult few years, and to plan for the jobs and services people will need as we recover.

We also want to see a continuation of the Troubled Families programme, bringing together support around a family to deliver positive results that also reduce demand on a wide range of public services.

Improvement

Sector-led improvement is a significant success story for local government, and we are keen to see this continue. With the context facing children and families constantly evolving, there is never room for complacency – children's services departments, councils and their partners must strive for continuous improvement.

The LGA already runs a range of improvement programmes for local authorities with clear evidence of success. This includes supporting local areas to understand how all partners contribute to social mobility in the early years, to peer reviewing council finances, to supporting local leaders to do the best job they possibly can. Continuing these programmes and developing new ones in response to demand and both local and national priorities, is key to securing positive performance in the long term.

Improvement will also mean capturing the lessons of the pandemic and putting in place plans to keep hold of what worked. The pandemic and our recovery from it offer an enormous opportunity to change the way that we work with children and families, to better suit their needs and to better support our workforce. We must not lose this as day-to-day business returns.

PART ONE

COVID-19: The impact on children,
young people and families, and our
immediate recovery

COVID-19 – The impact on children, young people and families, and our immediate recovery

The pandemic has had a huge impact on all of us. But for children and young people, who are still in the process of learning to navigate the world, the experience has been very different to that of adults. An enormous number of studies have been carried out since the start of the pandemic to understand the experiences of children and young people, which provide rich feedback for councils and the Government to consider in its future planning. The LGA has commissioned a report drawing together many of these studies to support this work, which is due for publication in Autumn 2020.

So far, while many children and young people have reported enjoying at least some of lockdown thanks to feeling happy at home and trying new activities and ways of learning,ⁱ surveys also highlight a lot of worry about the future. In particular, various reports highlight increasing mental health and wellbeing issues,ⁱⁱ while issues around future employment opportunities were also key,ⁱⁱⁱ including for care-experienced young people.^{iv} The Children's Society's annual Good Childhood report found that the pandemic had impacted on children's happiness, and that overall, 15 year-olds in Britain were among the unhappiest and least satisfied with their lives in Europe.^v

A Beatfrees national youth trends report^{vi} on the impact of coronavirus on young people found that of more than 1500 young people surveyed, 58 per cent said that COVID-19 has left them unsure about their futures. The report recommended that councils built young people into their recovery task forces and encouraged policy makers to engage with young people directly as they felt their concerns and questions had gone unanswered.

The country has an enormous task ahead of it to recover from the pandemic, in particular as we are still unclear about what the coming months hold. Many policies that impact upon the lives and wellbeing of children fall outside of the remit of the Department for Education – from housing and health to the environment and the economy – so we need a cross-Whitehall ambition that puts children and young people at the heart of Government. This is more important now than ever as the nation recovers from the biggest crisis it has faced in generations.

We support calls from our colleagues in the Association of Directors of Children's Services^{vii} and a wide range of children's charities^{viii} for a cross-government approach with the voices of children and young people at the heart.

The Department for Education must lead on a cross-Whitehall ambition for children and young people, with the role of each department clearly articulated, along with the introduction of 'children and young people impact assessments', to ensure that the needs of children are central to all new policies and legislation.

A named minister should oversee the implementation of such a strategy, working across government to improve outcomes for children.

Hidden harm

While many children and young people will have enjoyed extra time with their families at home during the lockdown, there will be others who found themselves trapped in homes where they felt – or were – unsafe or uncared-for. Reports of physical abuse to the NSPCC rose by 53 per cent during lockdown, while police-recorded offences indicate a particular

increase in incidents against adolescents.^{ix} However, during the first two months of the lockdown, referrals to children's social care fell by around 18 per cent.^x The experiences of those children may only come to light as they start to re-establish relationships with trusted adults as services start to re-open.

Contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline increased by 77 per cent in June 2020 compared to pre-lockdown levels, along with an 800 per cent increase in visits to the website and increased requests for refuge spaces.^{xi} Prior to the pandemic, domestic abuse was the most common reason for children and young people to be classed as 'in need' and allocated a social worker – the Children's Commissioner highlights that recent measures to contain the virus will have put even more children at risk.^{xii}

Stress is a significant risk factor for developing and maintaining alcohol and drug misuse problems^{xiii}, and the coronavirus pandemic is likely to result in many experiencing some of life's most stressful experiences – bereavement, major illness or job loss. Alcohol and drug misuse were identified in 18 and 21 per cent of children's social care assessments respectively in 2018-19.^{xiv} Councils are concerned about the likelihood of increased substance misuse as people struggle to deal with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, and how this will affect children and young people.

More than half (58 per cent) of young carers have reported to the Carers Trust caring for longer since the pandemic began, spending an average of ten hours a week more on caring responsibilities. Two thirds were more worried about their future than they had been and were more stressed than before the pandemic.^{xv}

As the medium and long-term impacts of the virus become apparent, more children, young people and their families are likely to need support. Some of those will need significant interventions, including child protection plans or even coming into the care system. But for many, they will just need some extra help to get through a difficult period. That could be low level mental health support, sessions with a youth worker, understanding how to support children showing difficult behaviours, or working through parental conflict.

Councils urgently need funding to reinvest in the preventative services that their local children, young people and families need, so that we can make sure help is available when it's first needed – not later down the line when the situation has reached crisis point.

We also need to ensure that we have enough suitable placements for those children and young people who need to come into the council's care. These were already under significant pressure prior to the pandemic, and some councils are reporting concerns that in addition to the potential for increased numbers of children coming into care, fewer placement breakdowns during the lockdown period as carers worked hard to ensure stability for children could mean an increase in placement breakdowns as restrictions lift.

The Spending Review must properly resource councils to enable investment in preventative universal and early help services to ensure that children, young people and their families receive the practical, emotional, education and mental health support they need, as soon as they need it.

The Government must urgently work with councils and providers to increase the availability of placements for looked-after children and young people to ensure that suitable placements are available to meet the needs of these children.

Education

Children and young people will have had very different experiences of education since schools closed to most pupils in March. Some will have worked with online tutors, or worked through excellent online lessons with the help of their teachers on the other end of a Skype call. Some will have enjoyed the opportunity to learn in different ways and thrived outside of the constraints of the school day. Others will have struggled without internet access, or in homes where parents were juggling full time jobs with home education. There is a real risk that the gap between children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers will have widened, with research suggesting the gap has increased by 46 per cent.^{xvi}

National data^{xvii} indicates that only around one in ten vulnerable children and young people attended school during the lockdown. Schools and social workers worked closely with families to encourage attendance at school but reported significant challenges, in particular trying to persuade families that there was no risk in sending their children to school while the national messaging was to “stay at home, save lives”. The next challenge for schools and councils will be to maximise the numbers of children and young people attending school when they reopen to all, and to support them with the transition back to the school day. Councils have particular concerns about ensuring vulnerable children return, including those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). And for those young people who already struggled with the rigidity of the school day, six months without a routine will only have made it harder to encourage them back into education.

The Government must work with schools and councils to take dedicated action to prevent the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and young people and their peers from widening.

Childcare and early education

Good quality early education has a positive impact on young children’s development, while childcare more broadly enables parents and carers to work and often gives children the opportunity to interact with other children and try new things in a safe space. However, lockdown saw the number of children attending early education fall to around 4 per cent of normal levels^{xviii} as families rightly kept their children home wherever possible. We do not yet know the impact of this fall in attendance on child development and school readiness.

A combination of historic underfunding for early entitlements and the significant drop in parent paid fees as a result of the lockdown means that the financial sustainability of early years providers is a real concern for councils, with a third of providers in deprived areas fearing closure within a year.^{xix}

We are calling for an immediate injection of funding for the early years sector to protect those most at risk of failure, to ensure that every child who wants a place can access one.

Physical Health

The Healthy Child Programme workforce in local authorities has done as much as possible to support children and families through online and virtual contact and resources, as well as high priority home visits. However, during the initial phases of the pandemic a high proportion of specialist public health nurses were redeployed in some areas to acute and adult community services, reducing capacity for health visitors and school nurses to identify and support vulnerable children and parents.

Should we see a second wave of the virus, health visitors and school nurses must not be redeployed unless this is essential for the wider response and agreed by the local Director of Public Health. These nurses provide a vital service in keeping babies and their parents safe and healthy, and we must learn lessons from the start of the pandemic by ensuring this service is protected.

Early years and school closures, the redeployment of the nursing workforce and the reluctance of parents and carers to bring children into healthcare setting resulted in reduced uptake of routine childhood immunisations. Closures of dental practices have also meant children missing out on routine dental check-ups – a significant concern with nearly 180 tooth extractions a day being carried out on under-18s prior to the pandemic.^{xx}

The pandemic has resulted in significant increases in demand for support from food banks^{xxi}, leading to concerns about access to enough, and healthy, food for children. For children who have not had regular access to outdoor space to play there may be concerns about the impact of this on development.^{xxii}

Routine childhood immunisation programmes will need a rigorous and extensive catch up schedule. To ensure local public health services can meet the expected increase in demand, urgent workforce remodelling, and resource analysis should be undertaken with partners across the sector to ensure the Healthy Child Programme has the capacity to respond to the immediate unmet need as we enter recovery, in addition to the longer-term work to address health inequalities exacerbated during the coronavirus crisis.

Mental Health

We are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 and the associated lockdown measures on children's mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future. It presents new challenges such as the impact of prolonged absence from school and early years settings on the mental health and cognitive developmental milestones of children, the impact of uncertainty and grief, and ensuring children are supported in their return to education and ready to learn.

There was a significant reduction in referrals to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) during the lockdown period, with some areas reporting a 50 per cent reduction,^{xxiii} while for those already known to CAMHS, there was a rapid move to remote support to allow the continuation of the service though the Early Intervention Foundation notes that virtual and digital interventions often face high dropout rates, emphasising the importance of keeping children and young people engaged.^{xxiv}

Mental health (of the child or someone else in the household) is a factor in 43.5 per cent of children's social care assessments.^{xxv} Research by mental health charity Mind indicates that the majority of young people (aged 13-24) and adults with existing mental health problems reported worse mental health as a result of the pandemic, while more than one in five adults with no previous experience of poor mental health said their mental health was now poor or very poor,^{xxvi} raising concerns about increased need for support early to avoid issues escalating and requiring intervention from children's social care to keep children safe.

The risk of developing a mental health disorder is magnified among children living in lower income households and children whose parents were in receipt of low-income benefits. Disorders also more likely among children who had experienced challenging life situations, such as their parents having financial difficulties^{xxvii}. As such, the impact of the confirmed recession^{xxviii} and increased unemployment is likely to impact on children's mental health.

Targeted mental health support will be needed for some groups who have been made increasingly vulnerable by COVID-19 and the lockdown. This includes those experiencing domestic abuse, the digitally excluded, vulnerable children, those who shielded and for those with learning disabilities. Culturally appropriate responses are also needed given the disproportionate impact on BAME communities.

The mental health and wellbeing response is best led locally by councils who have the insight, community assets (such as parks, libraries and schools) and partnerships to identify need and target interventions across the mental health spectrum. Councils are best placed to help the whole population with mental wellbeing as well as working with health colleagues and other partners to support those who are mentally unwell.

The Government must provide recurrent funding to invest in effective and evidence based mental health and wellbeing services and statutory mental health services for children to meet existing, new and unmet demand that has built up during the pandemic. This includes investment in preventative mental wellbeing and resilience work at scale to support mentally healthy childhoods and to provide targeted mental wellness support in the event of any future outbreaks.

Supporting families

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has protected many jobs, but as this rolls back from August, many are predicting widespread job losses. Scenarios developed by the Office for Budget Responsibility suggest a peak unemployment rate of between 9.7 and 13.2 per cent – rising from the pre-COVID rate of 3.9 per cent.^{xxxix} On 12 August 2020, the Office for National Statistics confirmed that the UK was in a recession following a record fall in the economy.^{xxx} Without a properly resourced local safety net, there is a real risk of families sliding into poverty, bringing with it risks to the health and wellbeing of children.

A survey of social workers by the Child Poverty Action Group^{xxxi} found that the vast majority (94 per cent) reported increasing prevalence and severity of poverty experienced by the families they work with in recent years, with nearly four in five (78 per cent) reporting that over half of the families they worked with had been affected by recent changes to the welfare system. This was prior to the pandemic and the impacts on household poverty outlined earlier.

Accessible hardship support, particularly in relation to the provision of food, fuel and other emergency provision has increasingly become a critical response to the deteriorating economic conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. With escalating numbers experiencing financial hardship, councils are reshaping or, in many cases establishing, Local Welfare Assistance schemes to get financial support the most hard-up households. The LGA has produced a [good practice guide](#) to support councils in the delivery of financial hardship support schemes.

Evidence is already emerging of increasing financial hardship impacting upon families. The Trussell Trust has reported a 107 per cent increase in demand for food parcels for children during the coronavirus crisis^{xxxii} while the number of frontline organisations applying to receive food from FareShare to support vulnerable children and families tripled.^{xxxiii} Councils reported shortfalls of more than £0.5 billion in council tax in the first three months of the crisis as people struggled to pay their bills,^{xxxiv} while the Department for Work and Pensions reported 1.5 million universal credit claims between 13 March and 9 April 2020, a six-fold increase on the same period in 2019.^{xxxv}

Furthermore, Shelter has found that nearly one in five private renting parents – equivalent to 458,000 adults – are now more concerned that their family will become homeless as a result of the pandemic.^{xxxvi}

Councils and the Government should work together to ensure a properly resourced safety net that prevents families falling into crisis in the event of job losses or financial difficulties.

The Government should bring forward its pledge to end ‘no fault evictions’ so that tenants have greater security.

Young people not in employment, education or training

Young people who are currently in education or approaching the juncture to transition into further or higher education have found their studies paused or partially continuing digitally. This means that many will not have accessed to face-to-face careers advice and support to make an effective transition to further or higher education, training or employment. Young people will also be missing out on the personal development curriculum, including employer interaction, work experience, which is fundamental to choosing the appropriate academic or vocational career pathway.

Young people who have additional barriers or come from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be most adversely impacted. Despite the best efforts of schools and colleges to keep in touch, these young people are unlikely to receive the advice and support needed, which could adversely impact their chances of progressing into education, training or employment.

There are also additional challenges affecting the delivery of apprenticeships. For instance, employers including councils continue to pay the Apprenticeship Levy but are unable to spend or transfer funds during the crisis due to widespread pauses in training and recruitment. This may potentially compromise the delivery and limit the number of apprenticeship opportunities.

We expect there will be a spike in the number of those not in education, employment or training (NEET) from September onwards. This is concerning for councils both from an economic and community welfare perspective, as the cost of supporting NEETs are significant, particularly over a lifetime. Being unemployed when young leads to a higher likelihood of long-term ‘scarring’ in later life – in terms of subsequent lower pay, higher chances of unemployment and reduced life chances^{xxxvii}.

Youth workers will have a particular role to play in supporting young people to return to school and helping those young people who struggle to find employment. With young people more likely to experience difficulties in finding employment as the country recovers from the pandemic, supporting them to pursue positive paths through this difficult time will be key to avoiding negative outcomes further down the line.

The Government must appropriately fund councils to deliver or commission the youth services that young people want and need to ensure that support is available as soon as it is required.

Apprenticeship Levy funding should be paused to avoid any funds expiring during and shortly after the crisis period, particularly where they were earmarked for activity that has since been delayed due to COVID-19 and would not therefore have expired otherwise.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

There has been a range of challenges with regard to supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through the pandemic, in particular the difficulties in finding suitable accommodation for quarantine for new arrivals and identifying appropriate long-term accommodation. This challenge escalated as lockdown measures across Europe began to lift, making it easier for young people to make it to the French coast to make the journey to the UK.

The Government made welcome adjustments during the pandemic to the funding available to local authorities to support UASC and UASC care leavers to reduce the financial barriers to offering homes to UASC from port authorities. However, with councils facing significant financial challenges as a result of the pandemic, the fact that government funding still fails to cover full costs means that port authorities and those who offer placements are still struggling to give UASC the care and support they need.^{xxxviii}

The Government currently pays those councils supporting numbers of UASC at or above 0.07 per cent of their child population a higher daily rate. Until a longer-term solution is found, we would like to see this rate 'follow the child' when another authority offers a placement to a child to support port authorities during the current emergency.

Equalities

There is clear evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on different groups in different ways, both in terms of the risk from the virus itself, and the impact of measures to contain it.

People of Black ethnic groups have the highest diagnosed rates of coronavirus, while death rates from the virus are higher for those from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups.^{xxxix} Councils have reported that this has had an impact on schooling for children and young people from BAME communities, with teachers and support staff more likely to be ill or self-isolating, and parents concerned about the risks of sending children to school. Meanwhile, research by Mind highlights that existing inequalities in housing, employment and finances mean that people from BAME groups have experienced a greater impact on their mental health.^{xl}

The Disabled Children's Partnership has highlighted that lockdown meant many care and support services were paused for disabled children. Half of parents reported that therapies or other extra support had stopped, while three quarters (76 per cent) reported that short breaks had been cancelled. Nearly half of parents said that their child's physical health had declined.^{xli} The same survey highlighted significant concerns about the return to school for disabled children, in particular around the safety of children and their mental wellbeing.

A study^{xlii} by University College London and Sussex University to assess mental health among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people during the pandemic found high levels of stress and depressive symptoms amongst young and transgender respondents. This reflects reports by the Guardian and the BBC,^{xliii} which highlight that many younger people have been unable to access support during lockdown, especially where home has not been a safe space for them to speak openly about their identity.

Religious beliefs may also have had an impact on children and young people's experience of the pandemic. In particular, there have been a range of impacts on the Muslim community, including higher death rates^{xliv} and risks of increased Islamophobia related to social media content linking outbreaks to Muslim communities.^{xlv}

These issues will need to be considered in local recovery plans to ensure that all children, young people and their families receive the support they need for their individual circumstances.

Workforce

The LGA's regular survey of the local authority workforce has consistently identified pressure on the children's services workforce, with 18 per cent of councils reporting a moderate disruption to their workforce at the start of July. Less than half reported that they were operating normally.^{xlvi}

Despite these challenges, the children's workforce – from social workers and early help practitioners to early years workers and teachers – has gone above and beyond through the pandemic to keep children safe and well. This has in many cases included working long hours and adapting to rapidly changing situations for months on end. Councils, schools and other employers will need to consider the implications of this on staff wellbeing, particularly if further outbreaks or lockdowns are experienced.

On the other hand, the workforce has shown remarkable adaptability and creativity, in many cases implementing new ways of working that have proven to improve relationships with children and families and strengthened local partnership working. The children's residential home workforce and foster carers have also reported that many children have valued the additional time spent with carers and the relationships they have been able to develop. The opportunity to implement long-term change should not be lost.

Some areas have reported increases in enquiries about becoming foster carers as people have had the chance to reassess their lives and found more flexible ways of working. This opportunity should be taken advantage of. We continue to call on the Government to commit to a national recruitment campaign for foster carers to provide the reach and coverage that local authorities may struggle to achieve, and are keen to work with them to develop an integrated campaign that councils can participate in.

<p>The Government should commit to a national recruitment campaign for foster carers, working with councils to ensure this can be tailored to local circumstances to maximise impact.</p>

PART TWO

Introducing child-centred approaches

Introducing Child-Centred Approaches

Councils have responsibilities under the Children Act 1989 and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) to ensure children are able to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have those views taken seriously. In the UNCRC, 'child' refers to anyone under the age of 18.

Councils should ensure they have mechanisms in place to capture the views of children and young people locally, and to incorporate these into council decision-making. Useful resources to support children's and young people's participation include:

- Hear By Right – an organisational development tool developed by the National Youth Agency to help organisations to plan, develop and evaluate their youth participation practices: www.nya.org.uk/hear-by-right
- Listening and participation resources collated by the National Children's Bureau to support engagement with young children: www.ncb.org.uk/listening-and-participation-resources.
- LGA councillor workbook on engaging with young people: <https://local.gov.uk/councillor-workbook-engaging-young-people>

There are many examples of councils effectively capturing the voices of children and young people and using these to influence the policies and services directly impacting on them. But we are suggesting that councils go further and look at how *all* council decision making can be framed through their lens. This might mean reviewing housing policies to consider whether they really deliver for children, young people and families. It might involve bringing together local children to find out what they really want from their local park, or groups of parents to discuss how they want to access services to support young children. Are local businesses encouraged to get involved in work experience, or supported to provide apprenticeships?

In setting out COVID-19 recovery strategies, councils will need to consider how children's voices are being incorporated and recognise that their needs and wants will be different to those of adults, both now and as we move through the coming years.

The [UNICEF "Child Friendly Cities" initiative](#) embodies a child-centred approach. It describes a child friendly city, town or community as one where children and young people:

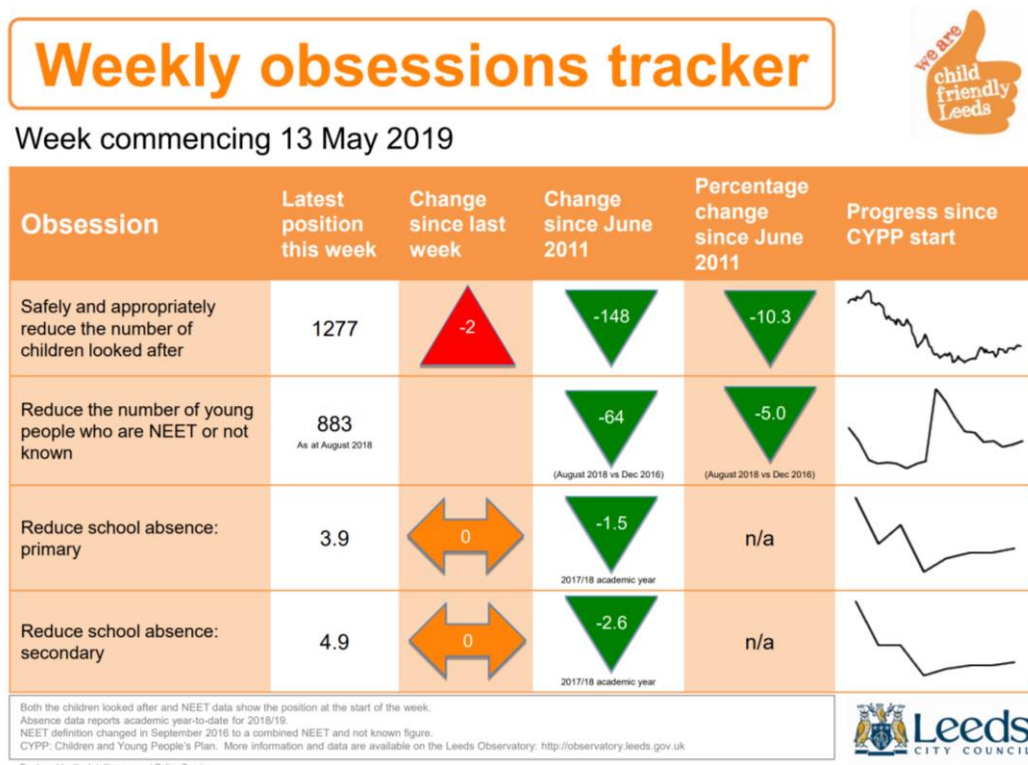
- Are protected from exploitation, violence and abuse.
- Have a good start in life and grow up healthy and cared for.
- Have access to quality social services.
- Experience quality, inclusive and participatory education and skills development.
- Express their opinions and influence decisions that affect them.
- Participate in family, cultural, city/community and social life.
- Live in a safe secure and clean environment with access to green spaces.
- Meet friends and have places to play and enjoy themselves.
- Have a fair chance in life regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, income, gender or ability.

There are a range of ways in which councils can work towards this, whatever their structure. In those areas with multiple tiers, this will require working across all levels to identify how each council can contribute to the broader aims for children and young people. This may present more challenges for a county than a unitary. However, councils consistently demonstrate their ability to work together for their residents, and we encourage leaders

across all authorities to consider how children and young people are central to their plans and how ambitions such as these can be used to encourage collective action.

A Children and Young People’s Plan can focus efforts across an area and hold different departments and organisations accountable for delivery. In Newcastle, progress against the city’s [Child Friendly City Action Plan](#) is reported to the council’s Youth Democracy Group, giving children and young people a direct opportunity to hold organisations to account.

Data is an important element in understanding progress, setting direction and translating a vision into action. In Leeds, a weekly “obsessions tracker” ensures a consistent focus on those issues the council has deemed most important to its children and young people.



Councils can consider adding a Children and Young People’s Impact Assessment to report templates to embed the child’s perspective in policy and decision-making. While this could mean ensuring that children and young people are considered under the “age” category, councils may wish to go further – and of course, “young people” are not a homogenous group. For example, the Scottish Government uses a [Child’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment](#) in policy-making which thoroughly considers the potential impact of policies and decisions on children and young people in relation to the UNCRC. [Accompanying guidance](#) helps officials to assess whether the assessment is relevant, and how to appropriately complete it.

Councils are used to working with partners to deliver positive outcomes for their residents and working in a child-centred way is no different. For example, as part of its Child Friendly Redbridge initiative, the London Borough of Redbridge has set up regular steering group and engagement group meetings with its [Child Friendly Partners](#). These help to coordinate planning and delivery of the programme and create opportunities for engagement with children and young people.

Councils can offer clear ways for local businesses and organisations to get involved. For example, the [Child Friendly Leeds brochure](#) suggests actionable ways in which others can help to deliver the five conditions of well-being that the council wants for all children and young people in Leeds.

There is a wide range of tools to support councils to develop their Child Friendly approaches at <https://childfriendlycities.org/resources/>

PART THREE

Moving forward

The challenge for children and young people's services

Children's services

The dual impact of significant reductions to council budgets and increasing demand for child protection services means that many universal and early help services have been scaled back or even closed in many areas – despite councils protecting and even increasing children's social care budgets at the expense of other services. Rising demand for services means that despite budgets for children's social care rising by more than half a billion pounds in 2018/19, more than eight in ten councils were still forced to overspend to ensure children were protected.^{xlvii}

Research by the National Audit Office^{xlviii} found that spending on preventative children's services fell from 41 per cent of children's services budgets in 2010/11 to just 25 per cent in 2017/18. There had been a corresponding rise in spend on child protection services, most notably for looked after children.

We outlined the clear evidence on the benefits of prevention and early help in our [Bright Futures: Getting the Best for 30 Years publication](#), including:

- The Troubled Families programme reduced the proportion of children in care and reduced juvenile custodial sentences and convictions;
- Greater coverage of Sure Start centres led to a fall in hospitalisations of children up to the age of 11, saving the NHS £5 million per cohort of children;
- Reducing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers across the country to the same size as in London would deliver an overall economic benefit of around £12 billion over the lifetimes of those young people.

Councils are constantly responding to emerging and changing challenges, both within society and within individual lives, to ensure children and young people are safe and well. This could be the impact of new threats such as county lines, or the well recognised challenges relating to transitions, for example. Contextual, transitional and relational safeguarding are helpful tools to make sure children are safe, working with the whole family and taking into account the child or young person's life context to make sure the right support is found at the right time. To deliver effective safeguarding and support, from early help through to help for children in care and care leavers, councils must be adequately resourced not only to provide services, but to invest in constant development and improvement.

<p>The Government must properly resource local authorities to deliver the effective, holistic and responsive services needed to keep all children and young people safe and well.</p>

The number and proportion of children in care has been rising year on year for over a decade. In 2009/10, 64,470 children were in care, or 57 in every 100,000. In 2018/19, that figure was 78,150 or 65 in every 100,000. There are also around 200,000 children in kinship care,^{xlix} many of whom are outside of the formal system but with often similar needs to looked-after children. While we know that being in care is a protective factor for many children, it remains the case that for too many, outcomes are not as good for children in care as for their peers.

We also know that there are problems within the system itself, particularly in areas such as placements (especially for those young people with complex or challenging needs), mental health services and support for kinship carers.

The Government has committed to a review of the children's care system, which was understandably paused when the pandemic hit. Now that we have moved out of the emergency response phase, it is vital the Government starts the review as soon as possible so that we can make the improvements needed to give children and young people the lives they deserve.

The Government's manifesto suggested a focus on adoption for children in care. We urge the Government to consider all forms of permanence as equal, putting the needs of individual children at the centre of decisions about their care. Adoption is absolutely the right choice for some children – but for others, long-term foster care, kinship care, a children's home or returning to birth parents is a more appropriate plan, and we should not lose sight of this in a bid to meet arbitrary targets.

The Government must begin the review of the children's care system as soon as possible, fully engaging with care experienced people, councils and children's social care providers.

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children reaching the UK – in particular the Kent coast – has been increasing rapidly since the start of the pandemic, and has left port authorities struggling to find enough suitable accommodation while stretching the capacity of the workforce. While some local authorities have offered support through the National Transfer Scheme, many have continued to raise concerns about the long-term costs of supporting UASC and UASC care leavers, which are not fully covered by the Government.

We call on the Government to fully fund the cost of supporting UASC and UASC care leavers to ensure that local authorities are properly resourced to provide UASC with the care and support they need.

Education

The council role in education has been transformed in recent years with greater autonomy for schools and a reduced role for councils with a move to a school-led education system. However, during the pandemic it quickly became clear that the role of the council as a local systems leader was a vital one. Local authorities and all schools in their areas – regardless of structure – came together to swiftly establish systems to keep children safe when they were no longer able to attend school, and to ensure those children who needed school places had one. We must ensure that the relationships built during the pandemic are not lost, and that systems work effectively for all children.

We also need to ensure that children have appropriate places to learn, that teachers have the settings they need to provide an excellent education, and that all children have the transport options they need to get to school safely every day. Prior to the pandemic, we had been raising significant challenges around transport to school with the government for some time. Research commissioned by the LGA found that council spending on home-to-school transport rose by 6.5 per cent between 2014-15 and 2017-18. Increasing expenditure is being driven by the costs of providing transport for children with SEND. Expenditure on transport for children with SEND has increased by 13 per cent for pre-16 children and by 68 per cent for post-16. This is in comparison with a drop of 12 per cent in spend on pre-16 mainstream transport and a drop of 27 per cent in spend on post-16 mainstream transport.

Transport for children and young people with SEND now accounts for 69 per cent of all home-to-school transport expenditure¹.

We are calling on the Government to:

- recognise the vital role that councils can continue to play in a school-led education system and to ensure that councils have the powers and funding to play this role effectively;
- create a single, local schools capital funding pot, bringing together existing programmes to create additional school places and rebuild, maintain and repair schools – including sufficient funding to ensure all new schools are carbon neutral; and
- provide additional funding to ensure councils can continue to meet their statutory duties to provide home-to-school transport.

Providing support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is one of the biggest challenges that councils are currently dealing with. Since the Children and Families Act became law in 2014, the demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has increased year on year, with an increase of 10 per cent in the last year alone¹.

We are pleased that the Department has recognised the challenges that councils are facing in delivering SEND support, with the allocation of an additional £780 million for high needs budgets in 2020-21, but it is vital that our members have long-term certainty over funding to support children with SEND. The Department's on-going review of SEND must set out how we can work collectively to increase levels of mainstream inclusion for SEND pupils and place fewer pupils in much more expensive independent and non-maintained special schools, as well as giving councils the powers to hold local partners to account for their work to support SEND children and young people.

We are clear that councils, with the right powers and resources, are ideally placed to hold both health and education partners to account for their input into local SEND systems. The current, autonomous, school-led education system should continue, but councils need the power to hold schools and Clinical Commissioning Groups to account for the decisions that they are taking to support children and young people with EHCPs.

Councils also need freedoms and powers to use the Dedicated Schools Grant as locally appropriate to help mainstream schools to better support children with EHCPs, and to withhold funding where schools are not meeting the needs of those children.

Sufficiency of local provision, and specifically school capital spending, is a key issue. Keeping as many children with EHCPs within their local communities will reduce the use of expensive independent and non-maintained special schools, but for this to happen councils need to be able to build new special schools where they are needed. Feedback from councils is that the existing free school route can be time-consuming in terms of working with the Education, Skill and Funding Agency and in finding suitable free school sponsors, delaying much-needed new places from coming on-stream.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans>

The Government's review of SEND must:

- ensure all councils have sufficient funding to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in their areas;
- create a clear accountability framework for SEND in local areas;
- restore flexibility to councils to move money between blocks of the Dedicated Schools Grant;
- empower Ofsted to use levels of mainstream inclusion when grading schools on their performance;
- enable councils to build new special schools where they are needed.

To support all of this work, the LGA is calling on the Government to fund the development of a sector-led improvement programme to help councils, health and schools learn from the best performing areas to provide more effective SEND support to the children and young people that need it.

Early education and childcare

We know that good quality early education can make an enormous difference to children's lives. By the time disadvantaged young people sit their GCSEs at age 16 they are, on average, 18.4 months behind their peers and around 40 per cent of that gap has already emerged by age five.ⁱⁱ Pre-school has almost as much impact on a child's education achievement as age 11 as primary school did – and the impact is even greater for those at risk of developing learning difficulties.ⁱⁱⁱ Recent policy changes have extended the reach of early education to more children and for longer. They have also supported more parents into work, or to work more hours.

However, we have long raised the issue of funding for early entitlements being insufficient, impacting on the quality of provision and the availability of good support for children with special education needs and disabilities. While high quality provision supports children's development, low quality produces no benefit or even negative effects.ⁱⁱⁱ Low funding rates result in low pay for childcare workers, with almost half (45 per cent) of childcare workers also claiming state benefits and childcare workers earning around 40 per cent less than the average female worker.^{iv} This in turn is resulting in a recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, in particular for well qualified staff.^{iv} This fails to recognise the vital work that childcare workers do and the significant contribution they make to the future life chances of all children.

Maintained nursery schools are currently funded at a higher rate than other settings in recognition of the extra costs they face, for example the requirement to have qualified teachers. They both achieve the highest Ofsted ratings – 63 per cent are outstanding, compared to 20 per cent of all providers on the early years register^{lvi} - and support more children with SEND than other settings.^{lvii} They are also concentrated in disadvantaged areas^{lviii} which is contrary to the trend for good and outstanding provision to be more likely to be located in the least deprived areas.^{lix} However this funding is only guaranteed until the end of the 2020-21 academic year.

We believe that funding rates need to be significantly increased to enable the early years sector to reduce the disadvantage gap and allow all children the opportunity of the best possible start. We must recognise the success of maintained nursery schools and properly

resource both these and private, voluntary and independent providers to appropriately pay the qualified staff needed to deliver high quality early education.

The Spending Review needs to increase the funding for early years entitlements and continue to resource maintained nursery schools to meet their statutory obligations.

The range of childcare schemes currently available, for example, 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, 30 hours for 3 and 4-year-old children of working parents, and tax-free childcare, is currently complex and schemes appear to have competing aims, for example improving social mobility or getting parents into work. This can make it difficult for parents to know the best option for their family and can result in varied support. We would encourage a more streamlined approach to provide a more coherent offer to families, encourage take up and support development of the right provision in the right areas.

We would also welcome consideration of the overall aim of childcare support for families. The Government has been clear on its ambitions to support social mobility for all, and we know that a good early years education can significantly improve social mobility.^{lx} Reviewing early years support in its entirety will help to identify whether investment being made is contributing as much as it can to delivering this aim, including ensuring the sustainability of the nursery sector.

Recent changes to the early years national funding formula have reduced the amount councils can retain to support quality improvement or the outreach work that has encouraged families from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage in early education. If the Government is to achieve its aims around social mobility in the early years, councils must be properly resourced to play their part in supporting those aims.

The Government should review the early years system to ensure that investment supports its ambitions and that parents are clear on the best options for their children.

Youth Services

Qualified youth workers and their colleagues across the youth sector will have vital roles to play in the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Youth services give young people safe spaces to go and trusted relationships with adults that can be the difference between being supported to make positive choices (including knowing where to go for help when it's needed) and being drawn into negative situations.

Youth workers are likely to have a particular role to play in supporting young people to return to school and helping those young people who struggle to find employment. With young people more likely to experience difficulties in finding employment as the country recovers from the pandemic, supporting them to pursue positive paths through this difficult time will be key to avoiding negative outcomes such as long-term unemployment,^{lxi} mental and physical health difficulties^{lxii} or criminal activity^{lxiii} further down the line.

While reports of youth violence and criminal activity fell during lockdown, concerns have been raised about the threats to vulnerable young people around criminal exploitation with suggestions that gang activity has not reduced – rather, there has been a change in behaviour, for example targeting different young people, carrying out online recruitment and staying local rather than operating on traditional county lines models. The National Youth Agency has highlighted that increased vulnerabilities as a result of COVID-19 could place vulnerable young people at greater risk, and has emphasised the importance of a youth work

and youth services response to adequately identify and support young people at risk or affected by child criminal exploitation.^{lxiv}

As a result of funding reductions for local government, however, and increased need for urgent child protection work, local authority funding for youth services has been cut by 69 per cent since 2010/11, from £1.4 billion to £429 million. More than 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 750 youth centres closed.^{lxv}

We are keen to work with the Government on the use of the £500 million Youth Investment Fund,^{lxvi} which represents a welcome boost to youth services across the country. However, this Fund is only expected to reach around half of local authority areas. It is important that *all* local authority areas are adequately funded to ensure youth services are available for local young people.

The National Citizen Service receives significant central government funding, totalling £1.26 billion between 2016-2020^{lxvii} despite offering only 2-4 weeks of activity for 16-17 year olds. The programme also achieves low participation rates, with 12 per cent of eligible young people took part in 2016.^{lxviii} Participation fell for the first time in 2019.^{lxix} While we recognise the value of the programme for those who take part and are keen for the NCS to still be available to young people who want to take part, this time-limited programme cannot replace year-round provision for young people of all ages. We therefore encourage the Government to devolve some of the funding for the programme to councils to enable them to deliver or commission the services that local young people want and need.

The Government should ensure that councils are properly funded to deliver or commission the youth services their communities want and need, including devolving some funding from the National Citizen Service to local authorities.

Youth justice

Council youth offending teams, the police and their partners have an outstanding track record of working with young people to avoid them coming into the youth justice system. There has been an 85 per cent drop in the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system over the last decade, and an 83 per cent decrease in the number of children receiving cautions or sentences over the same time.^{lxx}

Over that period, the youth justice grant has been cut by half. We know that those young people who are in the youth justice system have incredibly complex needs and require the most support from youth offending teams to step away from crime and move towards more positive choices. The juvenile reoffending rate currently stands at 39.2 per cent, compared to 28 per cent for adults.^{lxxi} It is vital that the grant remains at least at its current levels to ensure youth offending teams can give young offenders the dedicated help they need, without risking the success of work to reduce youth crime in the first place.

This will be even more important as we recover from the pandemic. Young people who are NEET or whose families lose work may look to crime to pay the bills, while the Youth Violence Commission has raised concerns about the potential impact of the pandemic on levels of serious violence as a result of poverty, family insecurity and inequality.^{lxxii} Properly resourcing YOTs, youth services and children's social care will help councils to work with young people and families early.

We urge the Government to retain the youth justice grant at least at its current levels to help youth offending teams give young people the help they need to avoid or move away from crime.

Workforce

An enormous range of roles makes up the children's workforce, and those working to support children and young people went above and beyond during the pandemic to make sure they could offer support and keep children safe as far as possible. This must be recognised, and it is vital that employers – including councils – dedicate time to listening to staff about their experiences. Not only will this ensure that members of the workforce get any support that they need, but it will allow employers to learn what worked well during the pandemic and what new ways of working should be maintained going forward for the benefit of staff as well as children and families.

As we move into recovery, it is vital that we consider what is needed to ensure that we have the workforce we need deliver the best outcomes for children, including through the challenges of the coming years.

We know that in many areas, recruitment and retention of children's social workers is challenging and that caseloads can as a result be too high. The [Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England](#) developed by the LGA and its partners were refreshed in March 2020 and set out the shared core expectations of employers to enable social workers to work effectively and safely. We encourage all local authorities to use these standards to develop a working environment where social work practice and social workers can flourish, in turn supporting recruitment and retention.

Feedback from applicants to the LGA's Return to Social Work programme through the pandemic found that the most common barrier to re-entering the profession was a lack of placements or return to practice opportunities, along with difficulties re-registering as a social worker and a lack of recent experience, while the most common reason for leaving was childcare responsibilities. Such issues should be considered by both local authorities and the Government in ongoing discussions around recruitment and retention.

Leadership has been crucial throughout the pandemic, with Lead Members for Children's Services and Directors of Children's Services playing vital roles at a local level to protect and support children and families. The LGA has a lead role in developing leadership within local authorities via its well-respected children's improvement programme. In the two years to March 2020, 62 councils took part in children's services peer challenges, over 120 lead members and scrutiny chairs attended leadership essentials courses and 26 councillors received peer mentoring. In the same time period, 83 per cent of councils improved or maintained their Ofsted judgements for leadership. An independent evaluation of the programme in 2020 identified a significantly positive impact on improvements in children's services, supporting councils at a political and officer level and across multiple levels of need, as well as supporting regional collaboration.

The Government should continue to fund the delivery of the LGA's children's improvement programme to ensure further improvements to children's services for the benefit of children and young people.

Foster carers and those working in children's homes have given children loving, safe homes throughout the pandemic, providing vital stability at a time of great uncertainty. Recruitment to both roles, however, is challenging and as the number of children in care continues to

grow, this means it can be difficult to ensure the best possible placement for a child. In addition to the immediate fostering recruitment campaign recommended earlier, we would also welcome a national workforce strategy for the residential children's home sector, promoting it as a career choice in the same way as social work is promoted, developing career pathways for those who wish to progress and giving all workers the skills to support children and young people effectively.

The Government should develop a national workforce strategy for children's homes to ensure a stable, well-trained and well-respected workforce.

The wider context

Public health

Health visitors provide a vital role in supporting the health and wellbeing of babies, young children and new parents, yet these roles are under significant pressure. We want to see an additional 3,000 health visitors recruited to improve health outcomes for children aged 0-5 and to reduce the inequality gap. Evidence^{lxxiii} shows that health visiting delivers savings and improves outcomes around teenage pregnancy, smoking in pregnancy, low birthweight, infant mortality, excess weight at 4-5 years, hospital admissions for injuries under 5 years and coverage of MMR immunisation. Intensive health visiting can reduce the likelihood of using other social care services.

The public health grant should include sufficient funding for an additional 3,000 health visitors to ensure the health of babies and new parents and reduce pressure on children's social care.

School nurses reduce childhood obesity, under 18 conception rates, prevalence of chlamydia, support mental health and can also advise on infection control and support immunisation uptake. We want to see every state secondary school and its cluster of primary schools have a qualified school nurse with specialist knowledge to provide support around infection control, keeping vulnerable children safe, sexual health, emotional wellbeing, healthy eating and lifestyles. These issues will be vital not only in the COVID-19 recovery, but in delivering the Government's priorities around issues including obesity and mental wellbeing in the longer term.

The Government should fund the employment of an additional 3,000 school nurses to support children and young people to lead physically and mentally healthy lives.

Councils work closely with their local partners including the police, health services and community groups to help reduce substance misuse, but councils' public health grant, which is used to fund drug and alcohol prevention and treatment services, has been cut by over £700 million since 2015. This is a false economy, not only in relation to compounding pressures on the criminal justice system and the NHS, but in terms of the impact on children living with those suffering from addiction. We are pleased that the Government has reiterated its commitment to public health and that current priorities will include vaccinating against preventable diseases and redoubling on efforts to tackle smoking, substance misuse and obesity.

The Government should work with councils to introduce a new Prevention Transformation Fund to help deliver on this shared ambition.

The Government should increase the public health grant to at least £3.9 billion a year by 2024/25 to match the growth in overall NHS funding, as part of the NHS Long-Term Plan.

The Government has made welcome investments in supporting children and families where alcohol misuse is an issue, including a pilot programme to support the children of dependent drinkers, and innovation funding to support Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) which have a high success rate in addressing parental drug and alcohol issues and preventing children from going into care.

We would welcome further investment in these projects to secure positive outcomes for more children and families, and continued innovation between the Government, local authorities and partners.

Mental Health

Local government's role in improving and maintaining residents' mental wellness across the life course – from childhood to old age – has always been important, but its importance has been further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to councils' range of core statutory mental health duties, they provide and commission services which have a significant impact on the country's mental wellbeing.

We are clear that, in addition to our statutory responsibilities, local councils are central in shaping and delivering a vision which moves us away from focusing on mental ill health to a locally led focus on helping everyone to stay mentally well, providing community support and helping people to continue with their lives.

As a result of the pandemic, we are seeing a shift in how people understand their mental health as something that needs to be actively looked after in the same way as our physical health. There have been positive changes which, with the right funding and support, could be the foundation for a more preventative approach to supporting mental wellbeing within our communities in a way that aids recovery and resilience in the long-term. For example:

- How much services, such as playgrounds, green and open spaces, children's centres, and general opportunities for play and social interaction are valued by the general population as necessary for good mental wellbeing for all ages, and particularly for children and parents;
- Greater awareness about the impact of personal behaviours on mental wellbeing, such as sleep and exercise; and
- Making the most of digital opportunities to stay connected with family and friends whilst recognising this is not a solution for everyone.

Supporting the mental wellbeing of children and young people delivers clear benefits. Public Health England highlights the importance of early intervention to avoid young people falling into crisis and needing expensive longer term interventions in adulthood, as well as reductions in the use of public services because of better mental health, better interpersonal relationships and increased earnings associated with the impact of improved mental health on education attainment.^{lxxiv}

Actions across the mental health spectrum include continuing to meet statutory responsibilities for children's mental health needs, supporting the mental wellbeing of frontline staff, bereavement support, suicide prevention, supporting mental wellbeing in schools, and supporting people who might need additional help such as unpaid carers and new parents. Councils also promote mental wellbeing through, for example, safe access to parks, youth services, children's centres, open spaces, encouraging physical activity and expanding public libraries' online offer.

Greater recognition should be given to the role of local government in supporting the objectives set out in the NHS Long Term Plan goals for mental health, including associated funding to embed new models of care and support focussing on prevention, early intervention and person centred care for children, young people and adults with severe and enduring mental health needs.

We urge government to recognise, with local government, the vital role of advocacy support to protect the rights of children and young people with mental health problems and to prioritise implementing in full the recommendations from the Wessely review of the Mental Health Act.

Supporting families

Good quality, affordable housing is vital to enable children and families to thrive. This applies not only to ensuring people are safe, warm and dry, but giving people privacy, room to come together as a family, and access to amenities such as schools, healthcare, parks and culture. Local planning is at the heart of this, responding to local need and local communities.

In addition to being affordable, houses need to be stable – families should not be at risk of regular evictions requiring children to move school or away from local networks. Housing-related stress can be a source of parental conflict as people struggle to cope, which further impacts on the lives and wellbeing of children.

The pandemic has increased concern amongst parents in private rented accommodation about becoming homeless, and councils are concerned about the potential for families being made homeless following job losses as a result of the coronavirus crisis. The LGA is clear that building 100,000 social homes each year must form part of the national recovery, to ensure that children and families have the homes they need, in addition to providing protection to private tenants to give them vital security.

Right to Buy should be reformed and councils should be funded to deliver increased social housing that reduces homelessness, supports people's well-being and is climate-friendly.

Councils should be given the tools, powers and flexibilities to plan for and deliver the quality homes and places communities need.

The Troubled Families programme has delivered consistently positive outcomes for families, including reductions in children entering care, reductions in the proportion of both adults and juveniles receiving custodial sentences, and fewer adults claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.^{lxxv} The opportunity and dedicated funding to provide support to those families most in need of help has been invaluable, and we are keen to work with the Government to design and deliver the next iteration of the programme, building on the success achieved so far.

The Government should use the Spending Review to commit to the ongoing delivery of the Troubled Families programme.

Skills and youth employment

Councils are working hard to fulfil their statutory duties and mitigate the risk of young people finding themselves not in employment, education or training (NEETs), however there is a reduced number of training and employment opportunities expected, with reports suggesting that the career prospects of young people will be severely affected by the pandemic.^{lxxvi}

With a reduced number of training and employment opportunities expected, the Government needs to engage councils and combined authorities and partners to plan and guarantee an education, employment and training place for all young people who were due to leave school

or college. This should be supported with high-quality careers, advice and guidance to ensure that the right academic or vocational pathway is chosen for their career.

The Government's prompt action and recent announcements of investment in skills and measures to create jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities for young people are welcome. However, these can only be successful if they are localised by building on the local intelligence and delivery models, working in partnership with employers and providers. Labour market interventions, such as the Expanded Youth Offer, Kickstart Scheme and Traineeships need to be linked to other local services where a more integrated and cross cutting support is required (for example health, mental health, homelessness). This approach would deliver better outcomes for individuals than standalone interventions.

Employment and skills policy is fragmented across central government and engagement with local authorities can be minimal. 20 employment and skills funding streams are managed by eight departments or agencies, spending more than £10 billion a year. Despite this investment, they often fail to meet local need, address economic and social challenges, or make a decisive impact on outcomes. The LGA's Work Local^{lxvii} model brings together councils and partners to plan, commission and have oversight of a joined-up service offering advice and guidance, employment, skills, apprenticeships and business support for individuals and employers. Such a model would be driven by local opportunities and needs with clear and responsive local leadership to improve experiences and outcomes of young people and employers.

We want to work with the Government to support young people to avoid the risk of them becoming NEET, to support the Government to deliver its Opportunity Guarantee and mitigate the pandemic and its long-term social and economic scarring effect on young people.

The Government should commit to work with us to implement Work Local and progress pathfinders to test 'Work Local' by 2024.

The Government should introduce further apprenticeship flexibilities to enable local pooling of public levy funds, so that councils could strategically plan provision across the area to address supply / demand side issues, target sectors to support the local economy, and widen participation to disadvantaged groups and specific cohorts.

Councils should have additional powers and resources to develop a coherent local offer to support young people not in education, employment or training.

Further investment is required to extend the September offer to guarantee education, employment or training places for those due to leave school or college. Maintenance grants for the disadvantaged and those at risk of, or who are NEET should be considered.

A flexible, multi-year local funding pot allocated to councils is needed to respond to local challenges, scaling-up successful projects or provide wrap-around support for young people to secure or sustain education, employment or training.

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