

## Local systems' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic

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### Summary of early messages

Natalie Parish, Ben Bryant and Andrew Bunyan

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# Purpose of the project

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This project will consider how education and children's services in local areas have responded and adapted to the coronavirus pandemic, and seek to draw out the implications for both the delivery of education and children's services, and for the roles and responsibilities of councils, schools and settings and other partners within local systems.

The project has four core aims, which are to –

1. understand how councils and schools have responded to the challenges posed by Covid-19 in relation to education and children's services, including gathering feedback from system leaders and those working in children's services about what has and has not worked in system responses to date;
2. consider how education leaders, children's services professionals, and families have adapted and responded to these challenges and new ways of working;
3. explore how different partners within the local area have worked together during this period, including how education settings and children's services have worked together to identify vulnerabilities and provide holistic support to families and communities; and
4. develop an evidence base for councils and their partners to draw on going forward as they seek to embed the good practice that has developed and address fresh challenges in the future.

# Project methodology and timeline

## Phase 1: Initial learning about local responses to Covid-19 (September-October 2020)

### Activity

- ✓ **Project planning.**
- ✓ **First set of fieldwork engagements** – (virtual) engagements with nine participating councils (via DCSs).
- ✓ **Initial findings** – summary of key messages from initial fieldwork.

## Phase 2: Considering long-term implications and councils' roles (November-December 2020)

- ✓ **Second set of fieldwork engagements** – follow-up discussions with nine councils and partners.
- ✓ **Roundtables** – to share and test emerging findings, key messages, and learning, and to shape recommendations.
- ✓ **Gathering additional feedback** – further conversations with key national stakeholders.

## Phase 3: Reporting and sharing findings and recommendations (January 2021)

- ✓ **Collate key findings** – final report and case studies.
- ✓ **Present key findings** – through LGA communications channels.

# How have local systems responded to the pandemic?

We have explored local system's responses to the pandemic in three broad phases.

## The initial response to lockdown

(March 2020)

- **Risk assessment** and “**eyes on**” vulnerable children and families. Systems for tracking school opening and attendance.
- **Communications routines** – shaping the system's response, information sharing (public health information, Covid-19 outbreaks).
- **Leadership style** – establishing expectations of leadership.
- **Building partnerships** – within councils (public health, children's services, education), “link worker” for schools, and between councils (regional networks).

## The adaptation phase: Keeping the system moving

(Summer term)

- **Communications** – supplementing national guidance with local info. Responsive systems to answer practical questions.
- **Practicalities and planning** (immediate and for the next phase) – FSM, transport, PPE, risk assessments, curriculum. Sharing school practice.
- **Ongoing priorities** – business-as-usual (recruitment), new initiatives that will help with the recovery phase.
- **Cementing and embedding partners** – within councils, schools, VCS, RSCs.

## The “new normal”: Covid-19 is part of the day-job now

(Autumn term)

- **Supporting the return of all pupils to schools** – practical advice, developing tools (recovery curriculum), support (EPs, EWOs).
- **Rapid responses** – to ever-changing context – e.g. “bubbles bursting”.
- **Planning for and dealing with increased need** – focus on emotional wellbeing of children, parental concerns re: transmission.

# Factors that may influence the nature of the local response

Where local systems saw themselves as having high levels of trust, collegiality, clarity of and respect for roles and responsibilities, and strong partnership structures, they have seen these as crucial factors is enabling them to build strong local responses to Covid-19.

In particular, DCSs have highlighted three key sets of factors that they consider have enabled them to shape successful local approaches to the pandemic.

1. **Council-school relationships**: a strong collective ethos, clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of councils and schools / settings (As one DCS put it, *'We have provided strong strategic guidance, strong supporting activity, but with clarity about where responsibilities lie.'*) By contrast, some local areas have been starting from a position of fractured relationships and tensions about what role the council should and should not play in local education.
2. **Expectations**: where schools and settings are used to working together on system-wide issues that foster a holistic approach to children and families – e.g. where there is a strong culture of early help, into which schools are bought-in and play an active role. (As one DCS put it, *'If we ask schools in this area to come together for something to benefit all [local area] children, they come.'*)
3. **System performance and quality of services**: where there is mutual confidence in the leadership and delivery of provision and services across schools and the council, DCSs have seen this as crucial to securing buy-in to a local system response. At a very practical level, this has meant that there are well-established professional relationships with known officers and practitioners in councils and schools / settings, that can be crucial in resolving practical and granular issues.

# Challenges and lessons learned from the responses so far

## National and local tensions

- **Trust:** Lack of trust between central and local government – councils feel used as “tools”, not engaged as partners. (Despite regular dialogue with RSC teams.) Disconnect meant messages from frontline services not heard. Tendency to centralise processes, data collection.
- **Timeliness:** Need for councils to interpret DfE guidance to ensure consistency. Frustration that guidance often cut across crafted local approaches.

## Focus on care, less so on quality of learning

- **Balancing care and quality of learning:** The emphasis of local interactions with schools have shifted towards care, health and safety and supporting families and communities (safeguarding, delivering food).
- **There has been less local discussion about the quality of learning during the pandemic.** Need for focus on online learning, challenges around access to IT. Renewed focus now on “catch-up” curricula and quality of learning.

## Partnership-based decision making

- **Governance:** In some areas there was frustration that wider partnership governance structures did not allow for a more co-ordinated multi-agency response to how children and families could be supported, for example the decision to redeploy health visitors.
- **Mutual understanding:** The need to break down barriers between education and children’s services about how each were responding and “myth-bust”.

## System fatigue

- **Resilience:** Concern that schools and partners will not have the reserves of energy and capacity to maintain the levels of work demanded so far. Resilience of education and children’s services staff is fragile.
- **Staffing:** ongoing challenges around staffing (isolation, shielding), but balancing requirements to keep safe with the ask of being in work and continuing the job.

# Opportunities that have arisen during this period

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## New modes of communication to support multi-agency partnership working

- Facilitated by virtual platforms, enabled more frequent “check-in” sessions. (Risk re: teamwork, QA, learning gaps?)
- Better attendance at multi-agency meetings – e.g. child protection reviews, annual reviews for children with EHCPs.
- Some innovative fora created – e.g. MAT CEOs, RSC chairing.

## Opportunities to embed new ways of working premised on early intervention to support the “recovery” phase

- Long-standing priorities, but also direct responses to the crisis ...
- E.g. developing new arrangements around access to SEN support services, improving EHC decision-making panels.
  - E.g. Building understanding of and support for trauma and emotional wellbeing within schools.

## Clearer shared responsibility for the most vulnerable children

- Improved information sharing about who the most vulnerable children and families are and how responsibility for supporting them can be shared.
- Swifter processes for decision-making and the front door into services.

# Long-term implications for educational and social care needs

**DCSs highlighted the way in which the pandemic had facilitated genuinely holistic discussions about children who may be vulnerable and why.**

While these conversations took place pre-pandemic, often they reflected a tension about the focus of education (attainment, qualifications) and children's services (care). DCSs considered that the pandemic had created a joint understanding and focus on which children (and families) should be seen as vulnerable, why, and the complementary roles of education and children's services in supporting them.

**They saw this more holistic, pragmatic, family-focused approach as being all the more important as levels of need continue to rise in local areas.**

- **Learning**: Local areas recognise that gaps in learning, progress and attainment have widened during the pandemic. Issues re: IT access. Schools are putting in place “recovery” and “catch-up” curricula, but acknowledge that the long-term impact on children's learning and wellbeing remains unclear. Implications for 16-17yos and risk of NEET – loss of training pathways due to Covid-19.
- **Attendance and home education**: Local areas reported an increase in elective home education, driven by parental anxiety, health concerns, positive experiences in lockdown. Some are taking a pragmatic approach to supporting children back to school, rather than using the formal attendance pathway.
- **Social care**: Local areas have experienced a more gradual increase, rather than a spike, in referrals to children's social care, but are expecting needs to continue to rise gradually over this period. Local areas are anticipating greater demand for early help and social care, as the economic effects of the crisis bring more families, who had previously been coping, to the attention of children's services. Some reporting increase in needs among very young children. Some areas recognise need to step up face-to-face visits to build relationships with families.

# Reflections on the role of local government in education and children's social care

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The experience of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the essential and indispensable role of local authorities in education and children's services.

'Never has it been so apparent that the education system needs a degree of co-ordination.'

'However centralised the DfE have tried to be, schools would not have been sustained without the role of the LA.'

Several DCSs reflected on the way in which the crisis had demonstrated the ongoing relevance of three key aspects of the LA role within local systems.

- ✓ **Champion of children and families** – embodying an ethos of collective purpose and responsibility for all of the local area's children and families, including the most vulnerable. Leading and co-ordinating a system-wide response that delivers for all families.
- ✓ **Convener of partnerships** – bringing together schools and settings, children's services and wider services (public health, CCGs) to shape a place-based response to Covid-19.
- ✓ **Commissioner of support and services** – facilitating and co-ordinating access to practical support (PPE, transport), brokering joined-up support in schools and communities.

# Questions to discuss

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Reflecting back on the actions that your local area has taken to respond to the pandemic since February, what have been the key successes and what has proved most challenging?

2

Are there new ways of working in education or children's services that have emerged over the last nine months, which you will look to embed going forwards?

3

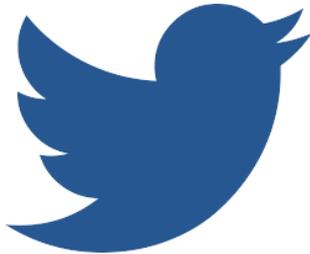
What do you think the long-term implications are for children, young people and families, and what therefore does this mean for the role of local authorities in supporting them?

Many thanks for your time and contributions to this discussion.

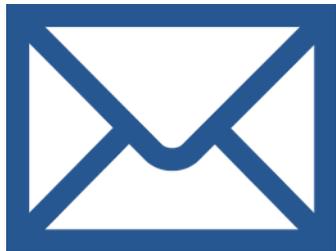
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E: [Natalie.Parish@isospartnership.com](mailto:Natalie.Parish@isospartnership.com)

E: [Ben.Bryant@isospartnership.com](mailto:Ben.Bryant@isospartnership.com)