

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION OF THE SUTTON TRUST FOR THE FIRST PRELIMINARY HEARING OF MODULE 8

Introduction

1. The Sutton Trust welcomes the commencement of Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry concerning children and young people, and is grateful for its designation as Core Participant.
2. The Sutton Trust welcome the opportunity to contribute to the important investigation into the impact of the pandemic on children and young people (CYP) across society in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
3. This written submission addresses the following topics related to the first preliminary hearing of Module 8:
 - a. Background
 - b. Provisional scope
 - c. Expert evidence

Background

4. The Sutton Trust is an educational charity that works to address low levels of social mobility in the UK. Founded in 1997, the Trust works to improve social mobility from birth to the workplace so that every young person – no matter who their parents are, what school they go to, or where they live – has the chance to succeed in life.
5. The Sutton Trust has carried out the earliest and most extensive research on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on CYP from lower-income backgrounds. This includes setting up the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities (COSMO) Study in

collaboration with the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) and the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS).

6. The COSMO Study is a major national youth cohort study examining the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational inequality, wellbeing and social mobility.
7. The experiences of CYP during the pandemic differed considerably by socio-economic group. During periods of school closures, barriers to remote learning – such as lack of access to a suitable device for learning or sharing a device, lack of a quiet space in the home, lack of support from teachers or parents – were all more likely to be experienced by young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those who experienced those barriers reported working fewer hours during lockdowns.¹
8. While many pupils without suitable devices received support through school and government distribution programmes, over half (53%) of those who lacked a device at the beginning of the pandemic had still not received one by the end of the second period of school closures.²
9. There were substantial gaps between state and private secondary schools in the intensity of remote learning during the first lockdown in 2020, with the private sector much better placed to adapt quickly (and attendance at private school strongly related to income level). 96% of independent school pupils had live online lessons in the first lockdown, compared to 65% of state school pupils.³
10. While state sector provision improved in the second period of school closures in early 2021, inequalities opened up within the state sector. Grammar schools (96%) and

¹ Cullinane, C. *et al.* (2022) *Wave 1 Briefing No. 1 – Lockdown Learning*. COSMO. Available at: <https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/lockdown-learning>

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

comprehensive schools with more affluent intakes (95%) caught up the most, compared to 80% at schools with the most deprived intakes.⁴

11. Even when schools re-opened, inequalities remained. Many students missed a large amount of school time even after schools had re-opened nationally. During the 2020/21 academic year, 18% of year 11 students missed more than 20 days of school, with a further 24% missing between 11 and 20 days. Young people from lower occupational status backgrounds were more likely to miss school.⁵
12. Many households' financial situation declined during the pandemic and gaps between groups widened, with 52% of disadvantaged households reporting worse financial health, compared to 34% of other households. # More families were forced to turn to food banks in the pandemic, with rates of psychological distress substantially higher in households who started using foodbanks in the pandemic.⁶
13. While government did have some catch-up provision in place, it was not enough to meet the scale of the challenge posed by the pandemic on children's learning, and particularly those from lower income families. Those from poorer homes were more likely to have taken part in catch-up activities, many students who would have benefitted from catch-up interventions were not offered them.⁷
14. Before the pandemic, slow progress was being made towards closing the attainment gap between children eligible for free school meals and their better off peers. However, post pandemic, 10 years of progress has been lost in closing that gap.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Montacute, R. *et al.* (2022) *Wave 1 Briefing No. 2 – Education recovery and catch-up*. COSMO. Available at: <https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/education-recovery-and-catch-up>

⁶ Cullinane, C. *et al.* (2023) *Wave 1 Briefing No. 6 – Financial inequalities and the pandemic*. COSMO. Available at: <https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/financial-inequalities-and-the-pandemic>

⁷ Montacute, R. *et al.* (2022) *Wave 1 Briefing No. 2 – Education recovery and catch-up*. COSMO. Available at: <https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/education-recovery-and-catch-up>

⁸ Sutton Trust (2024) *Closing the Attainment Gap*. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/closing-the-attainment-gap/>

The provisional scope of Module 8

15. The Sutton Trust welcomes the “*ambitious*” and flexible provisional scope of Module 8, especially its consideration of the impact of the pandemic on CYP “*from a diverse range of... socio-economic backgrounds.*”

16. It is also welcome that the provisional scope of the module specifically refers to encompassing “*the impact upon those children who stood to suffer disproportionate impact.*”

17. Given the background outlined above, it is clear that CYP from lower-income homes suffered a disproportionate impact during the pandemic and, as such, the Sutton Trust requests that they are added to the named areas covered in Module 8, as specified in Paragraph 44 of the Counsel’s Note to the Inquiry.

Expert evidence

18. The Sutton Trust is keen that the experiences of CYP from lower-income households are appropriately considered by experts in Module 8.

19. In addition to the Sutton Trust’s own testimony, suggestions of relevant experts upon which the Inquiry could call include:
 - a. Dr Jake Anders is Associate Professor, Deputy Director in the UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO), and Principal Investigator of the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities study (COSMO). Jake's research focuses on better understanding the causes and consequences of educational inequalities, evaluating policies and programmes aiming to reduce these inequalities, and how best to do this evaluation.

 - b. Professor Lindsey Macmillan is the Founding Director of the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO), creating research to inform evidence-led education policy and wider practice to equalise opportunities throughout life. She is Co-I on UKRI funded Covid Social

Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study and a UKRI grant considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student's university choices.

Conclusion

20. The Sutton Trust hopes these submissions are of assistance to the Chair.