
OPENING SUBMISSIONS FOR MODULE 8
(CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE)

ON BEHALF OF
THE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND, JUST FOR KIDS LAW
THE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ALLIANCE FOR ENGLAND,
THE CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES, AND CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

"...we did give up things like prom and exams and stuff like that and even though those, like, are silly 16-year-old things they're things that are really important and those memories, like, that we've lost out on. You know? I'm never going to have, like a shirt signed by everyone I went to school with.... Like, I think more people, including the government need to kind of appreciate the sacrifice that people from, like 14 to 20 made." (Children and Young People's Voices Report (INQ000587936))

"...sometimes I imagine people kind of had the invisible gas around them. That in my head is yellow, the gas is sometimes imagined 2 metres spread and that's the Coronavirus." (Ben, aged 9) (Children's perspectives and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and UK public health measures - Thompson - 2021 - Health Expectations - Wiley Online Library)

"I'm part of the COVID lockdown generation [...] We expected some sort of response from the government/health service but were let down – and continue to be, as still the majority of those people haven't seen a professional. Please fix the healthcare crisis." (Girl aged 17) (Children's Mental Health services 2022-23, March 2024, Children's Commissioner (INQ000471283))

Introduction

1. The Children's Rights Organisations ('CROs') are five organisations who champion children's rights and work directly with children and young people: Just for Kids Law ('JFKL'), including the Children's Rights Alliance for England ('CRAE'), the Save the Children Fund ('STC UK'), Centre for Young Lives ('CYL') and Child Poverty Action Group ('CPAG'). An introduction to those five organisations and the work they undertook in the pandemic is set out in each of their witness statements. Throughout the pandemic, the CROs witnessed first-hand the impact of the pandemic and the governmental response on children and young people and provided direct support and services to address their needs. They also carried out advocacy, campaigning and strategic litigation in relation to the legal and policy changes brought in and produced and continue to produce research on the short, medium and long-term impacts of the pandemic on the 'Covid Generation'.
2. In Module 8 the Inquiry will consider the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people across society, including an analysis of decision-making as it relates to children and young people. From the evidence provided by the CROs and the Inquiry's evidence gathered in this and previous modules, there is no doubt that many children suffered significant and long-lasting harm during the Covid-19 pandemic. The causes of this harm included the

isolation and loneliness children faced at crucial times in their lives, the gaps in meaningful education, as well as increased exposure to physical and psychological abuse, neglect, and violence. For many children, the events of the pandemic caused trauma which will have long-lasting or even lifelong impacts. This risk was particularly elevated amongst children in contact with children's services, in custody or seeking asylum.

3. The impact of the pandemic on children was not uniform. For some children the changes had positive impacts, especially for children who enjoyed being able to spend more time with their families, or those who were struggling with school and welcomed the break from formal education. However, the evidence overwhelmingly establishes that the pandemic, and the decisions taken in response to it, had a disproportionately negative impact on the most disadvantaged children and young people and those facing structural discrimination and inequality.
4. The CROs make the following initial submissions to the Inquiry in relation to Module 8:
 - a. Whilst any civil emergency is likely to have negative consequences, many of the adverse impacts on children were not an inevitable result of the pandemic and were predictable and avoidable. Many could have been better mitigated if decision makers had given the interests and rights of children sufficient priority.
 - b. Children have distinct needs and rights as compared to adults, and the rules and regulations adopted, and decisions taken in response to the pandemic impacted them differently. This was not sufficiently recognised by decision-makers.
 - c. The lack of priority for children's rights was not an isolated error made by individual decision-makers, but resulted from structural factors which persist, for instance the lack of a senior Government Minister with overarching responsibility for children and the failure to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ('UNCRC') into domestic law.
 - d. The pandemic both exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, such as widening the attainment gap, and impacted vulnerable children the hardest.

Position of Children in the UK on the eve of the pandemic

5. The Covid-19 pandemic arrived at a time when many of the gains which had been made in relation to children's rights and well-being up to the end of the first decade of this century had gone into reverse.
6. On the eve of the pandemic, 4.3 million children in the UK were living in relative poverty after housing costs – the equivalent of 31% of all children in the UK (DWP Statistics (INQ000649853)). The 2010s had seen a large rise in child poverty (witness statement of Kate

Anstey INQ000650990/9-12), with 1.8 million children in the deepest level of poverty by the beginning of 2020. Families with children were and remain at a greater risk of poverty than the general population. The additional costs of raising children coincide with a time when labour market participation is more limited due to caring responsibilities, and wages do not adjust for family size. The risk is even greater for families with children under 5, children of lone parents, children who live in a household where someone is disabled, where there are three or more children, and for Black and minority ethnic families (Ibid.) Children from Black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty: at the beginning of the pandemic 46% compared to 31% of all children (CPAG: *London Calling: "Stretched Too Far"* (INQ000608799/3).

7. The UK was heavily criticised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2023 (Concluding observations on combined 6th and 7th periodic report), informed by reports which included pre-pandemic research such as the England Civil Society Submission (LOIPR) (2020, INQ000176281), the Civil society alternative report 2022 to the UN Committee (INQ000649413), along with similar reports across the UK: reports from Together (INQ000649409), Children's Law Centre Northern Ireland (INQ000483306), and the Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group (INQ000649411). These reports highlighted increasing child poverty and child homelessness, as well as the failure to fully protect children from violence, abuse and neglect. The evidence disclosed significant cuts to children's services; for example, there had been a £1.1 billion cut in youth services funding in England over ten years since 2011 (see YMCA (2022) "Devalued: A decade of youth service cuts."), rising school exclusions which disproportionately impacted children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities ('SEND') and those from minoritised backgrounds (witness statement of Louise King (INQ000587998)), sweeping cuts to legal aid, increasing numbers of children with mental health conditions, punitive social security policies that cut support for children, and dire conditions for children in prisons. Austerity had hit children harder than many other groups (the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2015 (HL Paper 144, HC 1016, 24 March 2015)).

Children in Decision-Making

8. In the period leading up to the pandemic, children's rights and wellbeing were not considered as a priority by decision-makers in the UK government, and this was a significant causative factor for the increases in child poverty and the negative state of children's rights generally at this time. The lack of prioritisation of children in decision-making had been a concern for many years, as set out in the second witness statement of Daniel Paskins (INQ000651556/2) from Save the Children: "*There is a lack of consideration of the impact on children when making decisions or policies, and a lack of any kind of joined-up, cross-departmental national strategy to advance children's rights and wellbeing*". Mr Paskins has significant personal and

institutional experience working to influence government and his position is supported by the CROs.

9. This was also a concern of Helen McNamara, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary during the pandemic, who described her concern about the “invisibility” of children in decision-making (Transcript Module 2: 16/138/9-25). The CROs believe this stems from a systemic failure properly to consider children and their distinct rights and wellbeing. This evidence for this structural failure is set out in the second statement of Louise King (INQ000587998). Ms King evidences that children are not adequately considered in UK Government decision-making in several respects: there is an absence of a Cabinet level Minister for children, a national cross-departmental strategy for children’s rights, a statutory duty to consider the impacts of policies on children, and structures to ensure the effective participation of children. There is also no formal recognition of the distinct and important rights of children such as outlined in the UNCRC.
10. Kate Anstey, from Child Poverty Action Group, sets out in her statement (INQ000650990) the specific issues that have increased child poverty, in particular the decoupling of levels of social security support from need, through policies such as the “two child limit” and overall benefit cap in means-tested benefits which directly and disproportionately impact children and the abolition of child poverty reduction targets. The UK’s means-tested social security system is structured around household incomes and children do not generally have entitlement to financial support in their own right.
11. These problems persist and are not confined to individual governments. However, the structural invisibility of children was brought in to focus during the pandemic, because decision-making was conducted at speed without proper consultation with a diverse range of organisations from across the children’s sector and without consultation with the Children’s Commissioner for England. This exacerbated the pre-existing systemic issues which disadvantage children in government decision making. The decisions made in the emergency situation in March 2020 impacted negatively on children because the structures were not in place to ensure their rights and needs were properly taken into account. These structural failings meant that lessons were not learnt from the first lockdown and so the errors were often repeated throughout the pandemic.
12. The CROs request that the Inquiry consider how to embed children’s rights and wellbeing into the heart of decision-making. The CROs would urge the Inquiry to consider the need for:

- a. clear responsibility for decisions about children at Cabinet level to ensure that a cross-governmental approach to analysing and considering the impact of decisions and policies on children;
 - b. the use of Child's Rights Impact Assessments ('CRIAs') to ensure that the distinct needs and rights of children are recognised; and
 - c. children's voices to be heard and considered.
13. The importance of considering the potential impacts of decisions on children applies as much to areas that would not traditionally be recognised as being 'children's issues', as it does to decision-making in 'core' areas relating to children such as education and children's social care.
14. The CROs' submissions focus on what can be learnt for the next pandemic, but the CROs also believe it is important that the Inquiry scrutinises as a matter of historical record whether children were failed by the State during the Covid-19 pandemic. The CROs ask the Inquiry to consider recommending that the UK Government acknowledge the sacrifices made by children, as well as recognise and apologise to children for its avoidable mistakes and the negative impacts caused as a result.

Child Poverty

15. We ask the Inquiry to consider and analyse the impacts of poverty and other inequalities on children in the pandemic. The Inquiry has listed child poverty as ancillary to other issues that this Module will be interrogating. The CROs agree that poverty runs through the list of issues but emphasise the following:
- a. The poverty experienced by many children in the pandemic meant that they and their families were far less resilient to the economic shock brought by the crisis, as well as less able to mitigate some of the other impacts, for example, being unable to pay for essential learning resources, not having access to adequate learning spaces/environments or not having access to gardens/open space and adequate technology.
 - b. The increase in child poverty that occurred in the decade leading up to the pandemic was in large part caused by changes to the social security system, including the "two child limit" and the overall "benefit cap", changes that decouple need from the level of support a family receives. Maintaining this approach became even less justifiable in a pandemic, as families rarely had the opportunity to increase their earnings from work and were less in control of their overall income.
 - c. Measures of unequal outcomes for children, such as the poverty-related attainment gap, grew during the pandemic, thus demonstrating the exacerbation of the

inequalities, including socio-economic inequalities, that already existed ('Lessons in Learning: The Impact of Covid-19 on Educational Provision, Support and Progress' INQ000587959).

- d. The extra financial support given by government, including via the furlough scheme and the increase to universal credit or working tax credit rates, had a positive effect for many families, but was not linked to families' needs or the number of children present in a family. For example, a single person received the same £20 uplift on their universal credit as a family with three children. This detriment was further exacerbated by the overall benefit cap which resulted in some families not receiving the £20 uplift at all.
16. The CROs invite the Inquiry to explore these themes and the decisions that led to them within Module 8. These were predictable impacts of the crisis, they are likely to be issues in any future civil emergency, and understanding the impact on children cannot be achieved without considering that nearly a third of those children were in poverty, and that poverty itself had a material impact on their experiences during the pandemic. In this regard, Professor Taylor-Robinson described poverty as "a disaster for child health", leading to a number of negative health outcomes and inequalities that persist throughout life (Transcript Module 2: 4/5/8).

Trauma

17. The CROs welcome the expert evidence obtained by the Inquiry concerning the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people. However, that evidence omits reference to important neuroscience research and practice around the impact of traumatic events on the development of children and young people. As the UK Trauma Council states: *"The experience of trauma, can have a potentially devastating impact on children's development including physical and mental health, their capacity to learn and their social engagement within their family or the wider community"*.

18. This approach is adopted by the Youth Justice Board (INQ000571602/011), which states:

"Trauma can change the brain; particularly in children and young people whose brains are rapidly developing as they grow and mature. Problems as a result of childhood trauma are sometimes referred to as 'developmental trauma', 'developmental trauma disorder' or 'traumatic stress'.

There is an extensive evidence base on the various ways trauma presents in children. They may struggle problem-solving or concentrating. Or with impulse control, their behaviour, attachment, emotions, and language."

19. Understanding the traumatic impact of the pandemic on children is key to understanding how to approach planning for the future, and how to assist those children recovering from the direct

and indirect impact of school closures, lockdowns, and the lack of access to services. The Inquiry must therefore take into account this vital research.

Key Questions/ Approach

20. The CROs in Module 2 asked the Inquiry to consider key questions about all decisions that impacted children; similar key questions are posed here as relevant to all the areas being considered in this module:

- a. When any decision was made who, if anybody, was responsible for considering the potential impact on children and young people and their rights?
- b. Was the potential impact of the decision on children in fact considered? And if the anticipated impact was thought to be negative, was any mitigation considered?
- c. When the impact of the decision on children was considered, how practically speaking was this done? What expertise or analysis was obtained? For example, how were the rights of children balanced against the rights of adults? Further, was there ongoing monitoring of the impact on children?

21. In considering these questions, it is also important to consider whether the decision-makers recognised the distinct needs and rights of children generally, and the extent to which these were taken into account. It is also necessary to consider whether the specific needs of children facing different forms of inequality were considered, including those of children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, disabled children, racialised and minoritised children, and migrant children. We note that many children experience multiple forms of disadvantage, meaning it is essential for the Inquiry to take an intersectional approach to understanding the impact of the Government's decisions in response to the pandemic on children. We set out below the key issues that Module 8 will be examining and make brief submissions about some of these issues which we invite the Inquiry to explore further. These are not intended to be exhaustive.

Module 8 Key Issues

Issue 1: The extent to which children and young people were considered as part of any preparedness and planning for a pandemic.

22. School closures were the first community measure that was discussed when the pandemic hit (Professor Neil Ferguson, transcript Module 2: 11/206/17); the SAGE minutes confirm that the possibility of closing schools was discussed in February 2020. Professor Graham Medley confirmed that modelling had been undertaken on the impact of school closures on the spread of the virus, in which it was stated that school closures cause harms, but noted that SPI-M-O were not experts in that area. He confirmed that the failure to consider the harms of policies such as this was a major gap in the modelling. (Transcript Module 2: 8/112/23-25).

23. Despite this, and the recognition prior to 2020 that schools may close in a pandemic, according to Gavin Williamson, little or nothing was done to prepare for closures prior to 17 March 2020 (first witness statement of Gavin Williamson (INQ000268013)).

24. The Inquiry has already, in its Module 1 report, recognised a number of failures in planning and preparedness for a pandemic. The CROs invite consideration of why the harms to children caused by closing schools were overlooked and ignored without mitigations being considered and how this could be avoided in a future emergency.

25. Further, the Inquiry should consider whether children and the impacts of the pandemic on them, along with the impacts of decisions being made were considered outside of the remit of school closures.

Issue 2: The extent to which children and young people were considered in respect of the application of NPIs and the impact of those decisions

“Almost everyone’s mental health was in bits. So a second lockdown wasn’t a relief- it was the thing that broke us. It was three months’ of emptiness.” (April McKay- teenage blogger: “The Children’s Inquiry: How the state and society failed the young during the Covid-19 pandemic” (INQ000485092)).

“My child cries so much these days as he can’t see his friends. He wants to go to school. He can’t go swimming, he can’t even go to the park. He’s pretty much housebound unless I take him out for a walk. But all he wants to do is play in the park (Ibid.)”.

26. The CROs consider that both the disproportionality of the lockdown rules on children and the lack of clarity as to their application led to far greater harms than were necessary.

27. A Children’s Society report asked children aged 10 to 17 how they coped with Coronavirus changes in April-June 2020, speaking to over 2,000 parents and their children across the UK. The area where children said they were coping the least well was not being able to see friends, followed by not being able to see family members. *“Given what we know about the importance of relationships to children’s overall well-being, this is a key concern.”* (Life On Hold: Children’s Well-being and COVID-19, dated July 2020. (INQ000484791))

Disproportionality

28. The various rules that prevented interhousehold mixing and enforced social distancing disproportionately impacted children in general in two ways:

- a. Younger children, in particular those too young to leave the house independently, were not able to see their peers in the way that older children or adults were allowed to for the majority of the pandemic. Similarly, social bubbles were introduced that allowed

single adults or parents greater social interaction, but no such consideration was given for only children. Therefore, younger children had significantly less freedom to see their friends or peers as compared to adults or older children.

- b. Children's need for social interaction differs from adults. They are at a crucial time in their development, the brain is developing up until 25, during which socialisation with peers is key. Children experience time differently, and three months' isolation is fundamentally different for a 7-year-old as compared to an adult (Professor Taylor-Robinson Module 2 Transcript; 4/25/4-14). Play is an important part of this. Play opportunities are the number one predictor of adult life satisfaction (INQ000250257).

29. The decisions about what services to close or re-open often prioritised adults (or the economy) over children's well-being, with playgrounds closed in some areas whilst pubs were open. (second witness statement of Daniel Paskins INQ000651556/11-12).

30. Further, childhood should not be seen purely as a period of development, but a time when key memories are formed, and rites of passage such as birthday parties, being in the school play, moving to secondary school are felt keenly. This was described as a "key theme" in the Voices Report (INQ000587936/174)

"A key theme for children and young people who were set to mark specific milestones was the unfairness of having these compromised by the pandemic. Some described missing out on specific rites of passage and "crucial years" that would never come again, or on school trips or events that their year group would normally have experienced. This sense of injustice was felt particularly strongly by those making educational transitions during the pandemic, such as leaving primary and secondary school."

31. In addition to the disproportionate impact of lockdown rules on children generally, many groups of children were more seriously impacted by these rules. These included but were not limited to children in homes that were not safe or were not happy, and children in overcrowded accommodation or accommodation where there was limited access to outdoor space. Children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely than their white peers to have access to a garden and more likely to experience poorer-quality indoor conditions. (Witness statement of Kate Anstey (INQ000650990). Children with separated parents struggled to stay in meaningful contact with both parents, as even when the rules changed to allow contact between both households, in reality movement and contact was still impacted (Voices Report, INQ000587936/43). The 'Rule of Six' when introduced, meant a family of two parents and three children could only meet one additional person. Whilst this was eventually relaxed in Scotland to discount children under the age of 12, children in larger households in England were effectively blocked from having contact with peers. Many went for months without meaningful play with children their own age.

32. The CROs welcome the three questions posed by CTI in the list of issues concerning how the government assessed the impact on children. The Inquiry should examine whether the disproportionality of the rules on children generally and also on specific groups was recognised by the decision-makers, whether in any pre-pandemic planning, when implementing the rules initially or when assessing their impact. This should include considering who in Government had overarching responsibility for children, the use or lack of CRIAs and the reasons for the different approach to NPIs between the UK Government and devolved administrations.

Lack of clarity

33. There was a lack of clarity about how the 'Stay-at-Home' message, and the prohibitions concerning leaving the home, impacted children, especially as to whether this allowed children to go outside to play. The Inquiry should consider whether this was a deliberate decision by the UK Government to discourage children from leaving the house, or whether this was an oversight. A Bradford academic study showed that "one in three children have been rarely leaving the house" (Playing Out's Response to the Inquiry's Impact Questionnaire. (INQ000099722)). Whilst this would have been for a plethora of reasons, children staying indoors for weeks clearly caused them harm, and self-evidently impacted those who had less access to green space more acutely.

34. The list of essential reasons that allowed people to leave their homes in March 2020 included "exercise", but guidance issued to police gave examples such as running and yoga. The guidance was silent on the way in which children exercise (i.e. in the case of young children mainly or exclusively through informal play) and did not explicitly state that children could be outside to play or parents to supervise them. JfKL found through their casework that the police were more likely to stop children outside who they perceived to be less likely to be out of their homes for a "good reason." (Witness statement of Louise King INQ0000587998/153)

35. Again, we invite the Inquiry to examine why, when this was repeatedly brought to the attention of Ministers: (Witness statement of Alice Ferguson: INQ000588036/15; witness statement of Anne Longfield INQ000588139/33), children's right to play outdoors was not clarified then, or at any point over the next 18 months whilst various lockdowns were in place. Why was adults' jogging prioritised over children playing? Was the impact on children fully considered and understood, and how was that balanced against the other considerations?

Issue 3: The impact of the Pandemic on Education and Early Years' Provisions

"It has [school closures] put enormous amounts of pressure on us and makes us anxious that we won't achieve the grades we could." (female 14) (The Children's Society: Life On Hold: Children's Well-being and COVID-19. (INQ000484791))

“Don’t know where I’m going next year, all the induction days have been cancelled and I’ve got to make my decision on existing knowledge rather than experience.” (female, 16) (Ibid)

“Home Learning is difficult when your parents are essential workers and/or don’t speak English very well. I need to take care of my little sister all day and explain the worksheets her teachers have sent to her and it’s difficult to do all this while sharing one device for all of us” (17 year old girl, central south Wales) (Report from Children’s Commissioner for Wales (CCfW) titled Coronavirus & Me, dated June 2020. (INQ000643966)

36. The attainment gap had stopped narrowing for the first time in a decade prior to the pandemic. However, the pandemic widened that gap and progress made since 2011 was reversed (Witness Statement of Kate Anstey, INQ000650990). The closure of schools caused a number of predictable and predicted harms. The CROs pose a number of key questions for this topic. Early years learners (0–5) experienced distinct harms not captured by school-age metrics: missed developmental checks, reduced access to speech and language therapy, disrupted attachment-building opportunities, and the closure of baby groups and children’s centres that normally surface early safeguarding concerns.

Why wasn’t more done, and sooner, to support children who lacked what they needed to learn effectively at home?

“I share the desktop with my brother for his homework too..... I miss my laptop from school because I am dyslexic & it helps me more. I miss my teachers because they can help me better, especially when I’m not confident in what I’m doing. I miss my friends a lot.” (12 year old girl in Inverness) (Ibid.)

37. Between 1.14 and 1.78 million children across the UK had no home access to a laptop, desktop or tablet during the pandemic (Ibid.). Whilst some free laptops were eventually provided to some families, many still did not have a reliable device to access the internet, and other problems with resources such as internet access, stationery and workbooks also hindered learning. Children living in poor and cramped conditions struggled to have space, quiet or privacy to work. For example, Cam (Voices Report INQ000587936/15) had poor Wi-Fi, limited computer access and only one table between him and two siblings, so they had to choose who got to work on the table to do their homework and who had to work on the floor.

38. The Voices Report found that experiences of school varied significantly during the pandemic. While some schools, who did little or nothing to check that children were learning or were ok, others phoned, emailed and/or held regular online classes. One child said they “literally had no work for six months and no teacher ever called me. I just got to do what I wanted.” (Voices Report: INQ000587936/74).

39. As education is a devolved policy area, the UK and each devolved government has its own Free School Meals (“FSMs”) scheme. During the pandemic, each took different approaches to

providing replacements for FSMs to children in low-income families. Notwithstanding the huge difference that FSM replacements in general made to families' lives by alleviating some of their financial burdens, some forms of FSM replacements – namely, direct cash transfers – were better able to meet children's needs, because they gave families a choice in what food they purchased for their children (e.g. to better meet dietary requirements), allowed them to shop in places that were safe for and accessible to them; and afforded them discretion and dignity. While this approach was adopted in some areas of the UK by local authorities and schools, the UK government did not implement or support this approach for families in England despite DfE seemingly identifying as early as mid-March 2020 that food vouchers delivered through schools was “not the preferred delivery option in case of wholesale school closure” (Paper from DfE 15 March 2020: INQ000106221/3).

What support was provided for young children who missed out on critical early education?

40. Professor Taylor-Robinson's report sets out the importance of pre-schools and nurseries both to early childhood development in general and as “a leveller of children's inequalities”. (Expert report 'Child health inequalities' by Professor David Taylor-Robinson (INQ000280060)) The Inquiry will also be considering the impact of nursery closures, reduced health visiting and support for parents of babies and young children. These considerations must include informal groups such as breastfeeding groups and play groups, and not just nursery settings, as much support that is provided to babies and the youngest children is through such groups. We know that these very early years are formative in terms of longer-term development and attainment: children with stronger cognitive and socio-emotional skills at age five are significantly more likely to have a higher education, higher income and better health at age 42 (“Early Childhood Inequalities” INQ000649863). These early-years support groups were equally impacted by the closures and could not be meaningfully replaced by zoom calls.

How can remote education be improved for the majority of children

41. Children and young people's experiences of remote education can be improved with regular and personal contact with teachers, regular feedback, interactive and cooperative learning – however this requires children to be supplied with the correct equipment, better resources, emotional support and support for parents. (Witness Statement of Kate Anstey INQ000650990).
42. However, the Voices report found that for many children remote lessons were difficult, some complained that being on screen for lengthy periods of time hurt their eyes and that they got distracted. The lack of social learning context made it hard to be motivated at home, including being fully prepared and focused for remote lessons and some people would join from bed, and/ or turn their cameras off and watch TV (Voices Report: INQ000587936/80). It was difficult

for teachers to monitor and support engagement and understanding and help students who do not understand in a remote context (Voices Report: INQ000587936/82). The support or facilities that children required to make remote education easier or better for them were usually less accessible for those on a low income.

Was there any recognition of the additional support schools provide further to traditional learning, and how were those holes filled?

“If you don’t have a very good home life then school is a massive saviour” (Robin) (Voices report: INQ000587936/12)

43. Beyond teaching and learning, attending school provides many protective factors for struggling families. For example, access to ICT, provision of breakfasts and FSMs, and access to wider support including pastoral care, mental health support and extra-curricular provision. While many schools did what they could to meet families’ needs, significant gaps appeared with implications for children’s learning, development, health and wellbeing.

44. Riley (Voices report: INQ000587936/13) described being at home as being: *“like you’re in a pressure cooker”*. Many children were also unsafe at home, schools were providing a huge amount of emotional support, making referrals to children’s services and providing a respite for some. Was the wider role of schools recognised by those who decided to close schools? What was put in place to mitigate that harm?

Who looked after the children at home?

45. Whilst children of essential workers were allowed to go to school, many other parents continued to work during the pandemic, often from home, but without any means of accessing childcare, as schools, after school provisions and nurseries were shut. The rules on interhousehold mixing initially prevented grandparents or other family members from providing support, although childcare bubbles were introduced later in the pandemic.

46. In some cases, older children had to care for their younger siblings as their parents had to work (Voices Report, INQ000587936/42). In cases where there were no such older siblings, there was often no-one to care for younger children, some of whom spent a significant amount of time on screens.(What about the Children? INQ00028233)

What extra support was provided for those with additional needs?

47. School packs or home learning were rarely tailored to children with SEND (Witness statement on behalf of the Disabled People’s Organisations: INQ000588026). Those with SEND were more impacted by the disruption. In some cases, children had already lost learning due to

delays in securing provision for their additional learning needs prior to the pandemic, this was then compounded by the pandemic, including through provisions which explicitly weakened some children's entitlements to access the support they needed for their education (Witness statement of Louise King (INQ000587998/53-56). Further, many of those with communication difficulties were more in need of the face-to-face learning that school provided. (Voices Report, INQ000587936/89-92)

Could schools have re-opened sooner?

48. The CROs consider that - in addition to the fact that the management of school closures could have been improved and their impact better mitigated -the reopening of schools should have been further prioritised, with more effort by government put in to identifying and implementing better and further safety measures, working with schools to allow them to reopen in a way that minimised the impacts on children's education. It cannot be the case in a future pandemic which necessitates some form of 'lockdown' that restaurants, non-essential shops and theme parks are reopened before schools.

What was done to aid recovery from school closures?

49. Whether or not school closure was initially necessary or appropriate, it was clear that it would significantly impact children both in terms of educational attainment and wider development. Further, such impact was, predictably, more keenly felt by the most disadvantaged children. The Inquiry should therefore examine, when considering the closures of schools, what was considered necessary in terms of mitigation and recovery both during and in the immediate aftermath of such closures.
50. In May 2021, the Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins recommended a recovery programme for education and children in England, with a proposed £15 billion funding commitment, £12 billion of which would be paid directly to schools. A key question is why this was not implemented, and why no significant catch-up programme has been funded in England. Education is a devolved matter and the Inquiry will need to consider the different ways recovery has been undertaken throughout the UK.
51. The loss of education at key moments particularly impacted those in key transition years – starting school, moving to secondary school, moving onto work or university. The Voices report: (INQ000587936/70) notes that those going to university were worried that the loss of in person socialising affected their confidence and ability to make new friends.

"When I last went to school, I was really sad that we were going to have to go and then when I didn't know that school was going to close, I was really excited to have a leavers' assembly and

leavers' jumpers and my SATS. But obviously when I found out that I couldn't have leavers' jumpers or assembly, I was really upset. I'm not really excited that much to go to high school because it's a bit too early, I haven't done SATS or anything." (Rose, aged 11) (Ibid)

Issue 4: The Impact of the Pandemic on physical, mental health, wellbeing, development.

"I was getting stressed out because I couldn't move around... I couldn't work out... I got less fit" (aged 15) (Voices Report (INQ000587936))

"my physical health was just deteriorating, my whole body was falling apart. My muscles weren't doing anything, I wasn't walking." (aged 14) (Voices Report: INQ000587936)

52. Children's mental health was in crisis prior to the pandemic. For example, the number of referrals made to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services had increased by 26% in the five years leading up to 2018. (State of Children's Rights 2018: INQ000650991/9)

53. There is significant overlap between other issues addressed above such as the NPIs and the decisions to close schools and the impact on children's physical, mental health, wellbeing and development. The closure of schools, playgrounds and the rules on meeting others or leaving the house, as well as aspects of the disease itself, all caused significant impacts on children's mental health and wellbeing. Poverty is itself a driver of isolation, and there is a link between poverty and mental ill health in both parents and children ("Covid Realities: documenting life on a low income during the pandemic (INQ000608808/65-66).

54. Many children struggled both going back to school and socialising again, after such long periods alone. One teenager described losing "the courage to go outside." (Voices Report, INQ000587936/69).

55. In addition to the increase in mental health and wellbeing problems, it was increasingly difficult for children and young people to access support, and most of what was available was "online". George (Voices Report INQ000587936/16) was offered mental health support over the phone. He felt that he could not connect with the therapist as it was not in person. In the context of speaking in his bedroom he felt it was not private and was anxious that he might be overheard by others in the house. He gave up the therapy as he did not feel able to open up.

Recovery

56. Children's access to mental health support remains bleak. Overall rates of children and young people with suspected mental health conditions have increased substantially in recent years, from about 1 in 18 children in 2017 to 1 in 5 in 2023. (Report from Children's Commissioner titled Children's mental health services 2022-23 (INQ000471283).

"Access to mental health services is rubbish. Youth workers and youth clubs just don't exist in my area. My council is bankrupt and they are going to cut even more." (Girl, 14) (Ibid.)

“There isn’t much support for those who are not mentally ill, but have poor mental health and is struggling with more than anxiety and low mood.” (Girl aged 17) (Ibid.)

“I met several patients who had been waiting in the paediatric ward for 6 months following suicide attempts because there was no space in the mental health ward.” (Girl aged 17) (Ibid.)

Issue 5: Social Services

Children at risk

“Since lockdown my mum and dad have been getting angry with each other and then they end up hitting us.. Nobody else knows about it.” (Boy aged 9, Childline) (Ibid.)

“...since the coronavirus we’ve pretty much been trapped indoors 24/7. If we don’t play by their rules, then we get punished. One time, dad slapped me across the face...” (Girl aged 16, Childline)(Ibid.)

“Coronavirus lockdown makes [the abuse] worse because I can’t escape from [mum].” (Girl aged 12, Childline) (Ibid.)

“Things had been fine but over the last few weeks we have not stopped arguing with [mum] hitting me and me hitting her back. We have a social worker but that has stopped because of the lockdown.” (Girl aged 14, Childline) (Ibid.)

57. The evidence that children were put at risk by and in response to the pandemic is overwhelming. The CROs highlight some of the most stark evidence of this below.

58. The number of reported incidents of children dying or being seriously harmed after suspected abuse or neglect rose by a quarter after England’s first lockdown (Witness Statement of Jo Green INQ000650997). This was coupled with a 31% drop in referrals made by schools to Social Services in England between 19/20 and 20/21.

59. The National Youth Advocacy Service made triple the number of safeguarding referrals during the lockdown compared to the same period the previous year (Written Evidence from National Youth Advocacy Service INQ000498672).

60. Childline saw a 22% increase in the number of counselling sessions about physical abuse (Article from NSPCC titled “The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: physical abuse”, 01/08/2020 (INQ000648730)). The NSPCC helpline saw a 53% increase in contacts from people with concerns about children experiencing physical abuse (Ibid.).

61. Despite this, social workers did not usually see children face to face. Charlie (Voices Report INQ000587936/16) describes how hard it was not seeing his social worker in person, how difficult it was to open up on the phone. Regulations and guidance were amended to lessen the ‘burden’ on local authorities of compliance with these duties, which had been put in place specifically to help keep children safe. The consequences for children were predictable and

predicted. The National Youth Advocacy Service complained that: *“No responsible parent would reduce the protections for their children or stop checking on their welfare. It should be no different for corporate parents.”*

62. JfKL noted that it was hard to support children and young people remotely due to their lack of access to digital services, but also that it made it harder to build positive relationships and trust when children, especially those with communication difficulties which needed additional support (Witness statement of Louise King (INQ000587998)).

63. We ask the Inquiry to examine whether the predictable increase in risk to children and young people as a result of NPIs was sufficiently considered, and whether, particularly during school closures when the safeguarding provided by schools was absent, enough was done to monitor and/or safeguard vulnerable children.

Children in care/care leavers

“I live in a bedsit in a hostel. My room is small, and it is hard being in all day.” (Olivia, 19, care leaver) (Written Evidence from National Youth Advocacy Service, June 2020. (INQ000498672))

64. Children in care are less likely to have a good friend, and more likely to be bullied, than other children (Coram Voice & the University of Oxford: “10,000 voices: the views of children in care on their well-being” (INQ000621321)). Research by Coram Voice found that for all age groups of children in care, good friends and trusting, supportive relationships were really important. They highlighted being able to see family as often as they wanted, feeling safe where they lived, and liking schools as key factors to ensure their wellbeing (Ibid.). It was all these key factors that ensure wellbeing that were disrupted by the pandemic, making children in care particularly vulnerable.

65. Lockdown rules also disproportionately impacted those in care, as these children were unable to see their birth families for extended periods of time (Voices Report: INQ000587936/46). Children in residential homes were often prohibited by the rules of the home from leaving, even for a ten-minute walk as exercise, as they implemented their own, potentially over-zealous, rules to seek to respect the Stay-at-Home message (Voices Report: INQ000587936/33).

66. In some cases, children and young people who left care just before or during the pandemic found themselves in temporary accommodation and experiencing delays in being supported to find a longer-term solution. (Voices Report: INQ000587936/174).

67. JfKL noticed a higher level of difficulty in children and young people accessing support, including support to contact their social worker, the DWP or the local authority (Witness

Statement of Louise King (INQ000587998/48-52)). This led to a higher demand on the charity's hardship fund to prevent destitution or street homelessness.

Issue 6: The impact on children in contact with the Criminal Justice System

"So, you're not allowed to do anything. So, basically, you're on like a 23-and-a-half-hour bang up". (16-year-old child, YOI X) (Hannah Smithson: Unmasked and Exposed: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Youth Custodial Estate. A Compelling Case for Ideological Change | The British Journal of Criminology | Oxford Academic)

"So we only got 15 minutes for a shower in the morning and if you missed that you don't get another shower all day until the next morning. And you get 45 mins out on yard for football. I felt like I was a dog in a kennel." (16-year-old child, YOI X)(Ibid)

"Just, like, when you're on your own you've got no one at all to talk to. You know you're isolated from everyone. Like, not just physically to protect everyone. It's mentally as well. No one speaks to you. Or if they did, they speak to you through a mask or something like that, you know. It's hard because I don't know how I've made it through two isolations without talking to people." (15-year-old child, SCH A)(Ibid)

68. It is a longstanding problem that children from Black and other racialised backgrounds are disproportionately impacted throughout the criminal justice system and are more likely to be in a custodial setting, whether on remand or serving a sentence. Children in care or from a care-experienced background are also more likely to be criminalised, with those in residential care around ten times more likely to be criminalised compared with children who are not (Witness Statement of Louise King (INQ000587998)).

69. The conditions in children's prisons (including Young Offender Institutions, and Secure Training Centres) and Secure Children's Homes, during the pandemic were appalling. They were particularly bad in YOIs and STCs, where children were essentially in solitary confinement, locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day, and denied any education. Children in custodial establishments were also cut off from their families and any outside support network, as they were not allowed to see their parents or other family members for extended periods of time (Voices Report INQ000587936/46-47).

70. The CROs ask the Inquiry to explore what was discussed as options to resolve these issues within the Ministry of Justice, including in response to concerns being raised about the treatment of children in custody by the Children's Commissioner for England and others. In particular, the CROs urge the Inquiry to explore why no children were released early under the regulations that allowed for the early release of prisoners due to the pandemic, and why children were initially included in the regulations to extend custody time limits without any prior consultation with the Children's Commissioner for England.

71. Further questions need to be explored about the policing of children, including in relation to the enforcement of lockdown rules, and access to justice during the pandemic. JfKL noted the different approaches at different police stations, the continued arrest and detention of children in police cells, and long delays in the criminal justice system (Witness Statement of Louise King, paragraphs 151-169 (INQ000587998/40-48).

Issue 7: The impact on children and young people in contact with the immigration system
Immigration

72. The CROs welcome the Inquiry considering and investigating the impact on this cohort and note that those with uncertain immigration status are among the most vulnerable children. This is set out in Kate Antsey's witness statement (INQ000650990/41-45), which gives an overview of restrictions on access to benefits which contributed to the financial impact of the pandemic on families with parents/carers of different immigration statuses, including NRPF, EEA nationals and mixed immigration status families. However, the CROs do not specialise in issues concerning these children and do not have detailed submissions to make on this issue.

Issue 8: Access to and use of the Internet, social media and online resources

"That's why I have square eyes ... It [screen time] was not limited, but now it's limited to an hour... We spend as long as we wanted, but now since we have square eyes [my parents] decided to keep it an hour a day." (aged 9) (Voices Report INQ000587936)

"I think the pandemic was really bad for the little children because you were so trapped the only thing you had was electronic so people got so glued to it... [I feel] quite sad because like, I think I'm addicted." (aged 12) (Ibid.)

73. There was already, prior to the pandemic, a digital divide. CPAG's research found that ICT-related items were the most commonly missing resource across secondary school respondents. Not only did this limit their access to digital learning, it also meant children could not access support from teachers and continue their connections with peers (Witness Statement of Kate Anstey - INQ000650990).

74. For children with access to digital technology, the pandemic marked a significant shift in usage habits. Exposure to screen time surged by 52% in the pandemic. (Witness statement of Jo Green (INQ000650997))

75. Whilst screen time was a necessary way to access education, stay in touch, and provided positive support for many, there was also a lot of concern about both excessive usage and exposure to harm (second witness statement of Daniel Paskins (INQ000651556). Another child commented that they realized that they had spent 17 hours on screens a day (playing Roblox) (Voices Report INQ000587936/74).

76. JfKL noticed that, anecdotally, a number of children they worked with were being exposed to sexual and/or criminal exploitation and a link between that and children feeling isolated and spending significant time online (Witness Statement of Louise King (INQ000587998)).

Conclusion and Planning for the Future (Issue 9)

77. The CROs in Module 2 (Just for Kids Law, including CRAE, and the Save the Children Fund) set out a list of key recommendations that they asked the Inquiry to consider in their closing submissions (INQ000399536). The CROs hope that these will be reflected in the Module 2 report, but they clearly have relevance to Module 8 and we continue to endorse them.

78. Module 8 has the opportunity to explore in more depth the impact on children throughout the UK and will be able to make more in-depth findings. Each of the CROs has set out, in detail, what their organisation learnt from their work in the pandemic and what lessons can be learnt for the future. The CROs endorse all of the lessons learnt from each of the individual organisations and invite the Inquiry to consider the relevant sections of each statement.

“One of the greatest failings during the pandemic response has been the lack of recognition of children as rights holders rather than as passive objects of care or charity. The structures within which we make decisions need to be fundamentally rethought in order to enable children to take an active role in their own lives and communities.”

Statement from Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland (INQ000146940).

12 September 2025

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