

Written evidence submitted by the Children’s Commissioner’s Office

## The Children’s Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield OBE

The position of Children’s Commissioner is created by the Children Act 2004. The primary function of the Commissioner is to “promote children’s interests and rights’.

# The impact of Covid-19 on the disadvantage gap

## Children’s Commissioner’s for England written submission to the Education Select Committee.

### Introduction

In a normal week, almost 10 million children in England would be at nursery, school or college. In the week commencing 18<sup>th</sup> May it was just 240,000 children a day<sup>1</sup> – 2.4% of those who would usually attend. According to Government plans, a clear majority of these children will not go back to school before September. This will mean most children in England will have missed the best part of six months of formal education, the biggest disruption since the Second World War. During this time, there will have been massive variation in the amount of education different children have received and the amount of learning they will have been able to undertake.

We know time out the classroom affects all children, but disadvantaged children much more significantly. Previous research has suggested that up to two thirds of the gap between economically disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers is accounted for by the six-week summer holidays<sup>2</sup>. This is a period when no children are undertaking formal education, but where gaps still emerge in children’s skills and abilities. School buildings have been closed to most pupils for over two months now and many pupils will not be physically returning until September – a six month gap.

This is likely to affect children in three ways:

#### 1) Missing out on learning

All children will be having their learning disrupted. To what degree will depend on the individual school’s approach to online learning and the learning resources a child can access at home: a laptop (and whether this is their own or shared); access to the internet; a quiet place to work and study and support from parents are all vital prerequisites for even basic home learning. There are millions of children in England who don’t have these.

#### 2) Losing the ability to learn: Social, Emotional and Cognitive skills

Schools do much more than impart knowledge. They are the environment in which children develop the skills to learn, interpret and socialise. This includes the ability to sit-still and concentrate for extended periods; the ability to socialise with peers and adults and to control emotions while doing so; the ability to follow instruction and –most importantly – the ability to think creatively and confidently. These things do not come from textbooks or online tutorials, they are skills imparted in the classroom by teachers and learnt while playing with other children in the

<sup>1</sup> Taken from: DfE [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): attendance in education and early years settings](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0907568218779130>

playground. Some children will receive similar stimulation and support in the home environment, yet we know this is hugely variable.

Just as we think about how we need to give children learning materials at home, we also need to consider:

- a) The impact school closures are having on children's ability to engage with education
- b) The non-educational benefits children receive from school, including social and emotional skills and physical activity.

These factors are particularly important in the early years and when we are considering whether children are "school-ready". Skills from socialisation to concentration are developed in nurseries and other early years settings which are every bit as important as those taught in the classroom.

### 3) Problems returning to the classrooms

For the above reasons, and particularly the effect on social and emotional skills, children will be arriving back at school in the summer term or September in very different positions. Some will be able to slot back into the classroom, and quickly focus on making up on lost time. Others will have regressed significantly and will struggle both with returning to the classroom, and engaging with a curriculum. A class which might have been relatively cohesive in March, is now likely to have some huge divides. This means that a significant amount of time in September and the winter term will have to be dedicated to reintegrating children into the classroom. If this is not done properly, the disadvantage gap is likely to grow further through the first term back, as disadvantaged children face a greater struggle to return to education. This means there will be a greater chance of children becoming persistently absent, excluded or isolated within schools.

This briefing looks at what can be done to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the disadvantage gap.

#### **Section 1: Getting children back to school**

While most of this briefing is concerned with mitigating the impact of school closures, being in school remains the best option for most children. Section 1 looks at the evidence about the return to school.

#### **Section 2: What education are children getting?**

There are around 25,000 schools in England<sup>3</sup>, with very different approaches to supporting children's welfare and education during Covid-19. Section 2 examines what educational provision schools are offering during this pandemic.

#### **Section 3: Children without the resources to learn**

There are basic prerequisites for children to undertake in home learning: access to basic IT in a safe, quiet space in which to study. Section 4 highlights the children without these.

#### **Section 4: Keeping children engaged throughout the summer**

In lieu of school openings, Section 5 looks at what other measures could be implemented to keep children active and engaged.

#### **Section 5: Managing children's return to the classroom**

It is vital that planning commences now for children's full return to school (assumed to be happening in September), acknowledging that some children are going to find this transition much harder than others. Section 6 outlines the issues that will arise.

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<sup>3</sup> Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019, Department for Education

## Section 6: Transitions

As well as disruption to current education, many young people are facing a challenge navigating through to university, college or into the workplace. There are already big discrepancies between disadvantaged children and their peers in terms of outcomes and Section 7 looks at how this may be impacted by Covid-19.

### Annex 1: the children who will be most impacted

There has been an understandable focus on the impact of Covid-19 on children with exams next year, but the true impact is much wider. Annex 1 identifies six groups of children likely to be disproportionately affected – from very young children with low level of development to apprenticeships. For each group local authority level data is provided on prevalence.

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## Section 1: Getting children back to the classroom

Most of this briefing is concerned with mitigating the impacts of prolonged periods out of the classroom. However none of these mitigations can fully compensate children for not being in school. While children should not return to school until it is safe to do so (considering not just the risks to children, but also staff and the contribution to the overall R number), it is vital we prioritise school re-opening as part of the easing of lockdown.

The Government have announced a partial expansion of school places from the 1<sup>st</sup> June. At the first stage, this could lead school attendance to rise from its current 2.4%, to a maximum of 20%<sup>4</sup>. This is a sensible first step. But if the number of cases continues to fall, the justification for continuing to deprive most children of an education will also diminish, and therefore the Children's Commissioner is calling for the position to be kept under close review. The possibility of another significant expansion of school places from the 1<sup>st</sup> July should not be discarded if it can be accompanied by increased testing and tracing, and if we have evidence that infections have not increased following the 1<sup>st</sup> June expansion. This would still be of significant benefit to pupils. At present, Government proposals would mean children aged 11-14 could spend the day browsing Topshop for two and half months before they could return to school.

Our briefing [paper](#) on school returns examines the evidence, both on the threat posed by Covid-19, and the wider risks to children from prolonged periods out the classroom. It explains that, at present, the scientific evidence cannot offer any guarantees around whether individual children are at risk from Covid-19, and whether reopening schools is completely 'safe', and it is unlikely ever to provide such certainty. 'Following the science' is not always possible or even meaningful when the underlying evidence cannot provide definitive answers. Decisions still need to be made, which requires learning in real-time, both from other countries and using evidence from the ground in the UK. It means trying new things and carefully evaluating them. There is a need to balance the risks to public health with the secondary risks relating to school closures. The longer schools remain closed, the greater the impact on children's learning and wellbeing and the greater the risk of abuse and neglect going unnoticed.

However, offering school places is only effective if these places are taken-up. Successive surveys of parents have suggested widespread misgivings amongst parents as to the safety of the return to school. These concerns appear to be particularly prevalent amongst parents of disadvantaged children<sup>5</sup>. Anecdotally, the

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<sup>4</sup> The first stage of school re-openings is to offer school places to yrs reception, 1 and 6. This is 20% of yr groups, so we have assumed 20% of pupils. From mid-June, yrs 10 and 12 may be able to attend, though only a quarter each day.

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) - less than a third (29%) of parents in the poorest families would send their child back to primary school if given the choice, compared with 55% of the most affluent parent

Children's Commissioner has heard of some private schools with more than 90% of eligible children confirmed to return on the 1<sup>st</sup> June and some state schools anticipating just a handful. According to a recent report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, less than a third (29%) of parents in the poorest families would send their child back to primary school if given the choice, compared with 55% of the most affluent parents.<sup>6</sup> This poses a further threat to the disadvantage gap.

### **Nurseries**

As explained below, missing out on early development is every bit as important for children as missing out on later schooling. Many NHS nurseries have remained open and at high capacity, despite serving the families of those working in the frontline response to Covid. Their approach has been sensible, pragmatic and consensual, building up the confidence of staff and parents while implementing sensible health and safety measures. The research the Children's Commissioner undertook with NHS nurseries is available [here](#) (p8 onwards).

The Children's Commissioner welcomes the decision to allow nurseries to re-open or extend their places from the 1<sup>st</sup> June, but opening a nursery poses unique challenges:

1. Firstly, it needs to be determined what level of social distancing (however that might be interpreted) is required and how it should be implemented. There is a lot of good examples to follow, both from nurseries in England that have stayed open, and from other countries. But nurseries are small organisations, and those not part of a large chain do not have the management structure or resources that schools would have, so they will require clear and practical guidance as to what needs to be implemented.
2. Secondly, nurseries may require additional financial help. Unlike state schools, most they have multiple funding sources, with most relying heavily on parental fees, especially for younger years. Nurseries are likely to find demand is suppressed when they re-open, as many parents are still furloughed or anxious about their child returning. This might mean it is uneconomical in the short-term to open. Government needs to consider how to support the sector re-establish.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1) The Government should keep the return of children to education under review. The aspiration should be to give all children some time in school before the summer holidays.
- 2) The Department for Education needs to mount a professional communications campaign to reassure parents, children and teachers.. While the scientific advice is complex, one point on which there is a clear position is that the risk to individual children remains very low. The Government need to promote this message through social media and via schools.
- 3) The Department for Education needs to begin planning now for the return of schools in September, when it is assumed all children will return. If schools will need to implement social distancing in September they must be told how this will work before the summer holidays to give them time to implement the changes. Similarly, if it is likely that blended learning will need to be in place.
- 4) The DfE should provide additional guidance and support on the level and nature of education to be offered to children not in school between June and September.
- 5) The Department of Education needs to lay out plans for an extensive testing regime in and around schools, including plans for asymptomatic testing. This is needed to keep schools safe, but also to ensure that we better understand the level of in-school transmission.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

At a regional level:

- 6) Regional schools commissioners (RSC) need to be reaching out to all schools to advise and support them on their plans to have more children attending and delivering education to those not in school .
- 7) RSC's react teams should be liaising closely with local authorities to put in place any local-level mitigation required. Unfortunately, local authorities have raised concerns with the CCO about a lack of engagement from the react teams.
- 8) RSCs need to provide regional level co-ordination between NHS England/Public Health England and schools on regional-level data and access to testing.

At a local level:

- 9) Local authorities should be working with all their schools to provide support and reassurance in expanding the numbers of children attending. Directors of Public Health and Directors of Children's Services need to work together to deliver this.
- 10) Local resilience forums should be making a clear offer to local schools about access to: the latest relevant data, PPE (if required) and, most importantly, testing.

Nurseries

- 11) The Department for Education need a specific nurseries strategy to help them re-open and then re-establish after Covid-19. This needs to cover practical advice about how to reduce the spread of infection, as well as financial support, for nurseries whose numbers returning would not make an initial reopening feasible, as the Scottish Government have implemented.

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## Section 2: What education are children receiving?

Data published by the Department for Education shows that most schools are open, and that very few children are attending. Beyond this, we have very little reliable evidence of what provisions schools are making for their pupils or to what degree children are engaging with the offer. It is clear that some schools have taken it upon themselves to provide a range of support to children and their families well beyond the expectation established by the Department for Education. The Children's Commissioner's Office is aware of schools who are:

- Providing food parcels and lunches, often delivered to homes
- Ensuring regular check-ins with all their families via phones
- Using school reserves to buy equip and IT packages for vulnerable children
- Liaising with local partners (such as Family Hubs) to provide a raft of support to families
- Providing bespoke learning materials, videos and even live lessons<sup>7</sup> sometimes posting learning packs out to families.

In doing this, schools have been supported by an increased range of resources available from the BBC Bitesize programme and from the newly created Oak National Academy. The survey of teachers above found the BBC Bitesize resources in particular widely used, especially at primary. But, overall, most schools were continuing to use and create their own work programmes even as lessons moved online.

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<sup>7</sup> Live lessons are extremely difficult for a state school to provide as they rely not just on a child having access to a computer, but having access to a computer *at that time*, thus precluding children sharing a laptop with siblings or parents. For this reason, most state schools appear to have avoided live lessons.

However, it is not possible to determine (a) how widespread this level of provision is or (b) to what degree children are able to make use of these resources.

Regular surveys of teachers from the app 'Teacher Tapp' suggest that children are undertaking less than half the learning they would be in school, and this is particularly pronounced in the most deprived areas.

For example, Teacher Tapp surveys in March and April suggested that just a third of teachers thought that their pupils were working 3-4hrs a day or more. Moreover, there was little change between March and April, despite the roll-out of online lessons by many schools<sup>8</sup>. That means 67% of teachers felt their pupils were doing less than 2hrs of learning a day. In this there was a marked division based on the school. Just 20% of private school teachers felt their pupils were working less than 2hrs a day on average; this rises to about 60% of pupils in state schools in the most affluent areas of the country, and rises to still further to nearly 90% in state schools in the most deprived areas of the country.

When asked what barriers teachers witness to pupils engaging in online learning, teachers overwhelmingly identified four things:

- Limited/no parental support
- General, long-standing poor attitude to studying
- Lack of access to technology
- Lack of independent self-study skills (such as independence and organisation).

These barriers to home learning are deeply engrained, and that online teaching resources are not going to be sufficient to overcome these challenges.

A separate Teacher Tapp survey found private schools are much more likely to be streaming lessons (66% of private secondary, 6% of state secondary schools). This is likely to be linked to access to technology. However, private school teachers were also twice as likely to make telephone calls to families.. Just 16% of state secondary teachers reported speaking to a parent on the day of the survey, and just 11% said they had spoken to any pupil<sup>9</sup>.

- Other surveys have reported very similar findings. Research from the Sutton Trust<sup>10</sup> has shown that in the first month of lockdown there was significant variation in children's use of online resources and lessons:
  - A third of pupils were taking part in online lessons while schools were closed. However, at private schools, 51% of primary and 57% of secondary students had participated in online lessons every day, twice as likely as in state schools.
  - 60% of private schools and 37% of schools in the most affluent areas had an online platform to receive work, compared to 23% in the most deprived schools.
  - 45% of students had communicated with their teachers in the last week. At independent schools, the figure is 62% for primaries and 81% for secondaries.
- A survey of over 4,000 parents in England by the IFS<sup>11</sup> found that children from better-off households are spending 30% more time each day on educational activities than are children from the poorest fifth of households.

<sup>8</sup> <https://teachertapp.co.uk/who-could-return-to-school-if-it-were-possible/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://teachertapp.co.uk/what-are-teachers-doing-at-home-and-where-are-you-doing-it/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14849>

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## Section 3: Children without the resources to learn

### *Children without internet access*

Access to a good internet connection and a laptop, desktop or tablet has been crucial for children during the lockdown. Access to educational resources, including BBC Bitesize and Oak National Academy, has enabled many children to continue learning while they have not been in school. There are wider benefits to being online at this time too – being able to connect with family and friends, to develop new interests, and keep fully up to date with public health advice to name just a few.

But according to the IPPR, an estimated 1 million children and their families do not have adequate access to a device or connectivity at home.<sup>12</sup> Covid-19 has thrown into sharp relief the digital divide.

The Department for Education have acknowledged this and announced a digital access scheme for children without an internet connection or a suitable device. Devices should be being delivered over the next few months.

However, the scheme is highly limited and cannot in its current form have the necessary impact to combat educational disadvantage among the majority of pupils who are internet poor. Only a very small group of children are eligible for the scheme: children with social workers, care leavers and disadvantaged year 10s. This leaves large swathes of children without access, including years 7, 8 and 9 for whom there is no plan for them to get a device and no plan for them to return to school. Furthermore, the DfE has not published its analysis of how many children are currently eligible, so it is not clear whether the current allocation of 200,000 devices is sufficient for this group. Nor has it not published the local allocations, so it is also not clear whether the devices are going to the areas in greatest need of them.

In his evidence to the Education Select Committee at the end of last month the Secretary of State indicated that the scheme could be expanded to a larger number of children if it is shown to work well. But there has been little detail forthcoming on how the Department is monitoring the impact of devices. There is already sufficient evidence of the impact of technology on children's education – it is not clear what the review will show.

The Children's Commissioner has heard from schools who have been using schools reserves to provide laptops and IT. Where this has been possible, school-level procurement has led to wider and faster roll-out than the DfE's scheme. However, this has been dependent on schools using their limited reserves.

It is not enough to give a child connectivity and expect them to make the same level of progress as their more advantaged peers. Connectivity needs to be supplemented with the right kind of input from teachers and parents. There has been a great deal of variation in how schools have supported their pupils with online learning, with some doing much more than others. Children in some schools (particularly independent schools) are having a full complement of online lessons with the register taken. The experiences of children in other schools is very different.

### **Recommendations:**

- IT needs to be provided to a much wider group of children. The DfE should consider whether to expand their centralised scheme or whether to give schools the money to procure their own IT on behalf of their pupils.
- DfE should publish the data concerning (1) the number of children currently eligible for the scheme, and (2) the local allocations.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431\\_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf)

- The DFE should be setting clearer expectations as to what schools should be doing to ensure pupils are accessing learning. This should include teachers checking in regularly with all pupils learning remotely, especially disadvantaged pupils.

#### Children in unsuitable accommodation

To keep up with lessons from home, children need a safe, stable and quiet space; something which most people take for granted. However, there are hundreds of thousands of children in England without a proper home during lockdown. These children will find it immeasurably more difficult to concentrate on lessons at home, when 'home' doesn't really exist.

Last year the Children's Commissioner's Office produced a major study, *Bleak Houses*, into the scale and experience of familial homelessness in England. Official statistics from the MHCLG show that prior to the Covid-19 crisis there were 62,000 "homeless families"<sup>13</sup>. The children who meet this statutory threshold are classed as vulnerable for the purposes of attending school. However, these statistics fail to capture a further **90,000 'sofa-surfing' children**, who are living with friends or family, often in very cramped conditions, rather than accept local authority accommodation. Official statistics also do not capture the number of migrant families with **No Recourse to Public Funds**, nor children in families deemed by the local authority to be '**intentionally homeless**'. Taken in total, we estimate that there were some **210,000 homeless children in England before the Covid outbreak**,<sup>14</sup> not accounting for those who are deemed 'intentionally homeless' or NRPf.

'Home' for these children is often noisy, over-crowded and far from school. Homeless children are regularly placed in:

- **Bed and Breakfasts:** 1,900 families<sup>15</sup> were living in B&Bs in the last quarter of 2019
- **Office block conversions:** many flats constructed from former offices and warehouses do not meet national space standards – some as small as 13m<sup>2</sup> are used to house whole families
- **Shipping containers:** often cramped, poorly insulated and with hazardous entrances and cooking facilities. Anecdotally, shipping container sites are also known to be rife with antisocial behaviour.

The family homelessness crisis isn't getting any smaller. Our analysis for *Bleak Houses* suggested that there were already approximately **375,000 children living at financial risk of homelessness before Covid-19**. The Covid-19 crisis is likely to accelerate this number as families face rising unemployment, and growing arrears in rent. Hurdles to accessing Universal Credit payments – including the 5-week wait and the 2-child limit – will also be particularly punishing for families facing economic crisis at this time.

Keeping pace with remote lessons and homework in any of these settings would be an immense task for anyone; let alone the children who have already suffered the recent trauma and disruption of losing their home. Temporary homelessness already presented a huge challenge to children's ability to keep up at school; in research for *Bleak Houses* we heard of children reading school books in the toilet for peace and quiet.<sup>16</sup> Now mum, dad and any siblings will be sharing a single room for the duration of lockdown, where everyone must eat, sleep, play, exercise – let alone concentrate on homework. The longer school closures last, the more that homeless children will risk falling behind their wealthier peers.

#### **Recommendations**

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cco-bleak-houses-report-august-2019.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> MHCLG figures, as above

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cco-bleak-houses-report-august-2019.pdf> - p.13

Homeless children are often simultaneously known to housing teams and children's services, but co-operation between the two is poor locally and nationally. This has remained the case throughout Covid-19. The Government proved the principle of rapid, proactive action by housing 5,400 rough sleepers when the crisis began. But there has been no equivalent ambition to get children out of BnBs and into long-term homes. Yet the crisis has provided ample opportunity to do so: the market for commercial and short-term lets has collapsed, meaning much more accommodation is available in areas where homeless families tend to be concentrated. The DfE needs to work with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to set a national plan to get these families decent, stable homes.

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## Section 4: Keeping children engaged throughout the summer

Being out of school does not only impact on children's education. School is where children develop socially and emotionally through their interactions with others. Through games and sports they are supported in their physical health and fitness while having fun and learning to play and work together. By engaging in activities and clubs outside of the usual curriculum they extend their learning and build on their cultural capital. All of these skills aid children's education. For some children school is also a place of safety and the source of a much-needed meal.

Prior to Covid-19, the summer holidays signified a dangerous absence from all of this stimulation. Only 29% of schools have any form of holiday childcare and this is weighted towards secondary rather than primary school ages.<sup>17</sup> After the lockdown, the need for after-hours and holiday provision is even more pressing – especially for vulnerable children whose parents have struggled to afford and organise things for them to do during this period. Research by ukactive for example shows that the fitness of children from low-income families falls 18 times faster than their more affluent peers during the summer holidays.<sup>18</sup> Holiday provision can go some way towards addressing these inequalities. According to the Education Endowment Foundation, students who attend summer schools make around two additional months' progress (which reaches to almost three for disadvantaged students) putting them in a far better position for the next academic year.<sup>19</sup>

With the lockdown having set back some students much further than others, across all aspects of their development, the summer holiday provides an opportunity to mitigate this through summer schools offering sports, play, arts and tutoring. Schools are enormously valuable community assets which hold a wealth of sports facilities which will otherwise be unused.<sup>20</sup> Many schools will already have contracts and relationships with organisations which run summer schemes and will have planned programmes for this summer, which will have been placed in jeopardy due to uncertainty over what will be able to operate and what level of demand there will be. Others may not, but may for the first time be considering some form of summer provision to support their students. There are an army of sports coaches and youth workers currently unable to work who would be able to staff summer schemes (as already happens in some area). This could easily be supplemented with teachers including supply teachers who have been out of work for many months, employed teachers looking to supplement their income (which they have not been able to do with exam marking as they normally would) and trainee teachers who have not been able to complete their placements.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/unfinished-business-where-next-extended-schools>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ukactive.com/news/ukactive-calls-for-government-to-stop-disadvantaged-children-being-left-behind-by-summer-holiday-lockout/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/extending-school-time/>

<sup>20</sup> Already 39% of community facilities are locked behind school gates during holidays according to ukactive: <https://www.ukactive.com/news/ukactive-welcomes-government-funding-for-its-schools-as-community-hubs-model/>

## **Recommendations**

Summer schools and activity clubs can provide a range of benefits to children, but the Government need to act now if they are to be in place for the summer. This means providing funding to schools and existing summer schemes. Schemes will need planning now, in order to recruit and plan, they need guidance and support in doing this. If a decision is made much later, not only are we unlikely to see new summer schemes, but also projects which have run in previous years are unlikely to re-open.

The Children’s Commissioner strongly supports funding for summer schools and other summer schemes, with a focus on opening up places for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

## **Section 5: Managing children’s return to the classroom**

### *Catch Up funding*

Government guidance setting out the need for schools to assess where pupils are in their learning and abilities as a first step on the return to the classroom is welcome. This needs to inform a plan on how best to support these children.

However, teachers must be given the resources to implement the learning plans vulnerable and disadvantaged children will require. It is vital to acknowledge the scale of the challenge facing schools in helping children catch up on lost learning, particularly disadvantaged children who have lost out the most. This will require additional funding, so that schools are able to provide flexible, sometimes one-to-one support for pupils who have fallen behind<sup>21</sup>.

### *Managing re-integration*

Returning to school after months off school is going to be a challenge for all pupils. Children will need to become reacquainted with a more formal structure, routine and formal lessons. At the same time, their school experience will in some ways be very different and perhaps unsettling, with extensive social distancing measures in place.

Some children will cope better with this situation than others. Children at particular risk of struggling with the transition include:

- Children who have been bereaved or known someone who became seriously ill with the virus.
- Children who previously had difficult experiences at school (e.g. school-related anxiety, bullying) who have enjoyed the time away from school
- Children with SEND – particularly if they are going without the provision set out in an EHCP or have been delayed in accessing an EHCP assessment. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder may find the change in routine particularly challenging, as could children with social, emotional or mental health issues.
- Children with experiences of exclusion or on the edge of exclusion.

## **Recommendations**

<sup>21</sup> For an example of highly effective 1-1 interventions which support disadvantaged learners, see the EEF evaluation of the ‘Tutor Trust’

[https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/Evaluation\\_Reports/Affordable\\_Individual\\_and\\_Small\\_Group\\_Tuition\\_Primary.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/Evaluation_Reports/Affordable_Individual_and_Small_Group_Tuition_Primary.pdf)

- The Children’s Commissioner would like to see a **Catch-Up Premium** introduced. This should be allocated to local areas in accordance with key indicators of deprivation. It should be up to schools to identify the children in greatest need of this additional support – it may not just be children on free school meals (who are disadvantaged according to the Government’s definition). For example, it might be most needed by children with SEND,<sup>22</sup> young carers or children from low income families above the Universal Credit threshold. This funding needs to be available from September.
- The Department for Education and schools need to be preparing for a rise in **challenging behaviour** and school refusal stemming from the stress associated with returning to school. It is important that schools are sensitive and flexible in how they address these incidents. Teachers should identify any underlying causes of bad behaviour which might not be obvious (for example, parents do not always notify schools when a child experiences bereavement). Although it is important that schools manage behaviour (particularly in light of social distancing), there is a risk that we could see a spike in exclusions when children return to school if teachers are not flexible and understanding in their response to challenging behaviour.

In the initial stages of re-opening it is likely that most schools will be focused on helping children re-adjust to school and keeping them safe. Disadvantaged children are likely to struggle with the return to school more than most, and it is therefore likely that it will take them longer to get into a position where they are properly learning again. This could lead to the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils widening even further during this time, despite pupils being back in school. Government guidance states that “no school will be penalised if they are unable to offer a broad and balanced curriculum to their pupils during this period.”

#### Children who are delayed returning to school

Plans also need to be made for children who do not immediately return to school when they are allowed to, in order to prevent these children continuing to fall behind. These include:

- Families which are too worried about the virus to allow children to attend.
- Children who are shielding, or in households where someone is shielding.
- Children with prior negative experiences of school who become school-refusers.

Furthermore, the Government’s plan for easing lockdown indicates that schools in certain areas may be temporarily shut even into the next academic year, in response to local hotspots developing.

#### **Recommendations:**

Schools and government cannot abandon their responsibilities to children who are unable or unwilling to immediately return to school.

- Schools will need to continue to offer remote learning to these children and ensure it is effective – e.g. by having weekly check ins with pupils and assigning mandatory work.
- The Department for Education will need to expand its digital access scheme so that all of these pupils are able to access online learning.
- Catch Up funding will need to be available to schools to support children in this group – however late they return, and in proportion with how much time they have spent away from school.

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<sup>22</sup> Note that changes to SEND regulations mean that children with SEND no longer have an absolute right to the provision set out in their EHCP. Instead, councils have to use “reasonable endeavours” to secure the provision. This change is currently in effect until the end of May, but can be extended one month at a time. If children with SEND do not have the provision set out in their EHCP when they return to school in September, schools may find that these children continue to fall behind, and that more money has to be spent (e.g. via a Catch Up Premium) than would have been needed if their EHCP provision had continued.

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## Section 6: Transitions

There has been a decade of progress in reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The proportion of children aged 16-18 without a 'sustained' destination post-16 is now 4% of non-disadvantaged children and 12% amongst disadvantaged children<sup>23</sup>. But this is still a sizable number of children who are NEET, despite the law saying that they must be in education or training until 18. There is a considerable risk that the uncertainty created by Covid-19 will worsen this situation. This risk is minor for children with a clear plan of what they want to do next, particularly if they are staying within a school to go to six form (42% of children).

However, for those without a clear plan, they will potentially miss out on numerous college open days and access days to explore different options. The situation is likely to be especially complex for those planning to commence an apprenticeship, finding that training providers are furloughed while many employers are reluctant to recruit, or can't accommodate apprenticeships during social distancing.

The same situation is facing those completing education at 18 or 19, including young people seeking to enter a depressed employment market, young people deferring university places for a year or waiting for an apprenticeship to open up.

### Recommendations

- A rise in young people outside of education or employment is a likely consequence of Covid-19. The Government need to plan now to minimise this, and to ensure that for each young person their time out of employment or work is short. This means:
  - An expectation that start-dates and access points may need to be flexible to accommodate young people who have missed normal access pathways.
  - More opportunities to participate in voluntary activities, including an expanded national citizenship service
  - Local area monitoring of NEET numbers, with joint action between job centres, colleges and local authorities to respond to rising numbers, with specific funding support if needed.

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## Annex 1: The children who will be most impacted by Covid-19 disruption

While there has been an understandable focus on the impact of children who are undertaking exams next year, the impact of disruption of schools, nurseries and employers will actually have a much broader impact on children's educational attainment.

Below are six other groups – from early years to apprentices – who are likely to be disproportionately impacted. The tables gives local authority level data on the size of each population.

- **Children who begin school with significant development problems.**

The 'Early Years Foundation Stage Assessment', undertaken at the end of Reception year, can pick up children with significant early development problems. Here we concentrate on those children

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<sup>23</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/860135/Destinations\\_main\\_text\\_2020\\_REV.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/860135/Destinations_main_text_2020_REV.pdf)

who fail to achieve the expected development level in more than half of the indicators. One primary school headteacher described this to the CCO as equivalent to being a year behind in terms of development.

About 13% of all children start school at this level. Some will be due to specific health or educational conditions, but for most it is the result of the home environment. Just 5% of children in Richmond have significant development issues upon starting school. It is 23% in Middlesbrough and 20% in Hull, Bolton, Stoke and Sandwell. Children who begin school with such low levels of development tend to be from a home environment highly deleterious to their development. It is therefore likely that this prolonged period back at home will reduce their prospects of catching up with their peers, and expose them to increased risks of harm.

- **Children who are living in overcrowded housing**

As highlighted in Section 3, families living in overcrowded homes are likely to find lockdown particularly difficult. Much of this burden will be felt by children attempting to carve out a safe space in which to do schoolwork. Across the country this is several hundred thousand children, but tightly concentrated in a few areas in central London. In Tower Hamlets, more than a quarter of children are living in severely overcrowded houses.

- **Children who have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)**

All children with disabilities are likely to be impacted by school closures. This might be children with really complex needs who would normally attend a special school with a range of specialist interventions and 1-1 support. For example, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder may have highly-developed coping strategies which are specific to the classroom. But it will also include children who find school very difficult and are much preferring time at home, who will find the return to the classroom difficult.

Children with high-level special educational needs will have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC). These children are eligible to go to school if their needs cannot be safely met at home, but only a small minority of them are actually attending. Furthermore, this group represents only 3% of children. A much bigger group of children – 930,000<sup>24</sup> have lower-level SEND needs, such that they receive in-school support but nothing more. The prevalence of these conditions correlates strongly with deprivation: 20% of children in South Tyneside have SEND, more than twice the prevalence of Havering in outer London (9.9%). These children are more likely to fall behind without in school educational provision.

- **Children living in homes without access to adequate internet connection**

Access to an online curriculum is dependent on being able to use the internet. Partaking in live lessons, or even watching video tutorials, demands a reasonable internet speed. In Section 3 highlights the situation of those without the resources to access the internet, but there are also children in homes where the internet (mobile or broadband) is simply too slow. Neighbouring areas can have totally different rates of internet access: just 0.02% of homes in North Tyneside are unable to access fast internet, while it is nearly 10% in nearby Northumberland.

- **Children in areas where the disadvantaged gap is already pronounced**

For all the reasons outlined in this briefing, it is expected that the already significant disadvantage gap is likely to rise. When considering how this is likely to impact the education landscape, it should be remembered how much the disadvantage gap already varies. In North Lincolnshire (the area around Scunthorpe), the gap is 14%. On the other side of the country, in the Wirral the gap is 36%.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/vulnerability-in-numbers/?q=special+educational+needs>

In Ealing the gap is also 14%, but in nearby Sutton it stands at 35%. Those areas with already wide discrepancies are likely to see these rise further as a result of the educational disruption.

- **Children undertaking apprenticeships**

There are about 100,000 apprenticeships in England under-19. But these children are now facing a perfect storm of weak employer confidence, furloughed training providers and social distancing regulations which makes it hard to complete current apprenticeships or apply for next year. The Children's Commissioner will be publishing a further briefing on this next week.

In some areas apprentices make up a relatively insignificant number of 16-18 old's learning pattern: it is less than 2% but in nearly all Central London boroughs. But in other areas the change will be much more significant: more than 10% of 16-18s yr olds are undertaking an apprenticeship in Hull, the East Riding and North Yorkshire. These areas may become a victim of their own success: having achieved a great number of apprenticeships, this makes them more vulnerable to the current downturn.

LA name	% of children with a score below 26 on their EYFS assessments	% of children with an EHC plan	% of children with any identified SEN (SEN support or EHC plans)	Disadvantage gap in pupils getting 9-5 in English and Maths (%)	% of children living in overcrowded houses	Children in households where no broadband above 2mbps is available (rate per 1000 0-17 yr olds)	Rate of apprenticeship starts amongst 16-18 year olds during Q2 2019/20 (per 100 16-18 year olds)
Barking and Dagenham	17	2.7	14.1	-17.9	16.27	0.15	2.95
Barnet	11	3.0	13.7	-27	10.62	0.00	1.47
Barnsley	15	4.0	14.9	-22.1	2.52	0.90	7.45
Bath and North East Somerset	11	3.2	14.7	-33.4	3.28	2.24	5.69
Bedford	13	2.8	15.7	-22.8	4.12	0.99	4.58
Bexley	12	3.0	14.1	-23.7	5.87	0.25	6.68
Birmingham	19	3.2	16.8	-21.7	9.85	0.12	3.61
Blackburn with Darwen	17	2.6	17.4	-21.9	6.18	0.67	7.98
Blackpool	17	3.3	20.4	-19.3	2.94	0.00	6.61
Bolton	20	3.2	13.9	-21.7	4.74	0.18	7.45
Bournemouth	10	3.0	14.5	-32.1	5.15	1.30	6.80

Bracknell Forest	9	2.2	13.8	-33.7	3.31	1.14	4.60
Bradford	15	2.8	16.6	-19.3	6.21	0.81	6.58
Brent	16	3.2	13.1	-15	17.70	0.05	1.60
Brighton and Hove	11	3.3	16.4	-34	7.27	0.01	2.45
Bristol, City of	13	2.5	15.5	-28.8	5.98	0.00	5.84
Bromley	11	3.2	14.5	-30.6	5.16	0.37	4.57
Buckinghamshire	9	3.3	12.7	-35.7	3.63	2.07	4.64
Bury	12	3.4	16.2	-21.1	3.49	0.12	7.31
Calderdale	14	2.8	15.0	-26.6	3.32	1.02	9.67
Cambridgeshire	13	3.2	14.2	-30.5	3.00	2.39	5.26
Camden	12	3.6	15.5	-23.8	14.63	0.00	1.24
Central Bedfordshire	10	3.1	14.4	-23.4	2.93	0.99	7.03
Cheshire East	12	2.5	10.8	-30.6	2.03	3.42	7.02
Cheshire West and Chester	11	3.1	15.6	-31.6	2.28	1.67	6.58
Cornwall	12	2.4	14.2	-25.3	2.51	3.26	7.68
Coventry	17	2.6	16.3	-19.4	7.82	0.07	6.68
Croydon	13	3.5	15.1	-21.9	9.64	0.00	2.79
Cumbria	11	3.2	14.9	-24.5	1.83	8.24	14.56
Darlington	17	3.9	16.3	-29	2.72	5.74	8.71
Derby	17	3.7	16.8	-28.9	5.17	0.01	7.78
Derbyshire	14	2.6	15.0	-26.7	2.15	3.34	9.33
Devon	10	3.5	17.4	-27.2	2.01	10.69	9.16
Doncaster	14	2.7	14.2	-21.2	3.21	0.87	7.75
Dorset	10	3.4	16.6	-23	2.15	3.34	8.80
Dudley	18	3.1	17.4	-25	3.61	0.00	7.91
Durham	13	2.9	14.9	-23.4	2.29	3.17	9.45
Ealing	15	3.4	14.1	-14.4	13.95	0.00	1.40

East Riding of Yorkshire	11	2.8	13.5	-25.8	1.91	4.35	12.88
East Sussex	9	3.5	14.1	-26.2	3.26	1.11	4.35
Enfield	17	3.0	13.3	-23.4	12.59	0.16	2.62
Essex	11	3.4	13.5	-24.5	3.18	3.20	6.82
Gateshead	8	3.4	15.0	-25	3.52	0.38	7.76
Gloucestershire	10	3.0	15.9	-35	2.58	2.15	7.56
Greenwich	13	2.9	15.9	-18.2	11.63	0.00	2.79
Hackney	14	3.5	16.8	-23.4	16.94	0.00	1.66
Halton	16	2.9	17.6	-27	2.85	0.02	7.34
Hammersmith and Fulham	12	4.2	15.3	-28.9	12.24	0.00	1.90
Hampshire	9	3.2	14.3	-31.5	2.72	2.28	7.48
Haringey	12	3.1	15.1	-25.1	17.03	0.00	1.33
Harrow	14	2.8	12.4	-25.3	10.36	0.16	1.61
Hartlepool	17	2.7	16.0	-27.2	2.65	1.94	9.95
Havering	11	2.7	9.9	-26.5	5.62	0.41	7.42
Herefordshire	10	3.3	17.0	-25.3	3.12	8.73	7.81
Hertfordshire	12	2.2	14.5	-33.6	4.32	0.75	4.48
Hillingdon	11	3.7	14.4	-20.3	11.53	0.17	3.78
Hounslow	14	3.4	17.0	-18.1	13.46	0.00	2.74
Isle of Wight	13	4.4	17.0	-22.7	2.54	2.45	6.25
Islington	13	4.3	18.5	-21.6	12.95	0.00	1.63
Kensington and Chelsea	14	2.2	12.7	-20.8	8.33	0.00	0.99
Kent	10	3.4	13.5	-33.1	3.64	2.51	4.75
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	20	3.2	17.5	-17.8	4.26	0.01	10.62
Kingston upon Thames	8	2.9	12.2	-30.7	8.02	0.16	2.59

Kirklees	14	2.9	13.3	-27.7	4.86	0.39	8.38
Knowsley	14	4.2	18.9	-15.6	4.12	0.10	9.76
Lambeth	14	4.4	17.1	-15	13.65	0.00	1.96
Lancashire	15	3.1	13.2	-27.5	2.95	1.52	9.42
Leeds	14	2.1	14.6	-25.7	3.90	0.47	7.08
Leicester	18	2.8	14.2	-15.9	10.11	0.00	4.35
Leicestershire	11	3.2	13.6	-26.7	2.03	1.18	8.19
Lewisham	10	3.5	16.3	-22.1	12.91	0.00	2.45
Lincolnshire	13	3.3	16.3	-27.5	2.29	8.62	8.46
Liverpool	17	2.9	18.8	-27.1	4.46	0.01	5.92
Luton	17	2.8	14.8	-18.1	11.92	0.00	3.46
Manchester	19	3.4	16.0	-20.7	9.02	0.65	3.42
Medway	11	3.5	17.0	-24	4.51	0.23	7.52
Merton	12	4.1	16.6	-26.6	9.20	0.00	2.30
Middlesbrough	23	3.6	17.2	-24	4.54	1.18	7.21
Milton Keynes	11	2.9	13.9	-21.6	4.97	0.67	4.20
Newcastle upon Tyne	12	2.8	16.0	-30.7	4.45	0.06	5.06
Newham	14	0.8	11.9	-10.4	26.26	0.01	2.17
Norfolk	10	3.2	15.7	-23	2.29	4.29	6.94
North East Lincolnshire	15	2.7	14.5	-14.1	2.50	0.59	7.72
North Lincolnshire	14	3.1	15.7	-25.4	2.77	4.42	7.45
North Somerset	8	1.6	12.7	-21.6	1.90	2.74	8.17
North Tyneside	13	3.7	15.4	-29	2.21	0.02	8.62
North Yorkshire	10	2.5	13.4	-28.9	2.03	12.91	12.51
Northamptonshire	13	2.5	13.0	-25.5	2.73	1.09	7.09
Northumberland	12	3.4	14.5	-29.4	2.03	9.31	10.28

Nottingham	17	1.7	15.2	-20	7.00	0.07	3.95
Nottinghamshire	13	1.5	10.7	-27.1	2.20	1.23	7.64
Oldham	19	3.6	15.0	-18.7	7.23	0.65	6.75
Oxfordshire	9	2.5	15.9	-30.2	3.16	1.19	5.88
Peterborough	17	3.3	14.2	-19.2	5.19	0.76	4.72
Plymouth	14	3.6	17.1	-28.6	3.85	0.02	12.99
Poole	10	3.0	16.6	-32.1	2.92	1.89	6.80
Portsmouth	13	3.6	16.8	-25.1	5.59	0.00	6.32
Reading	14	2.8	14.6	-33.1	6.19	0.03	3.93
Redbridge	14	2.6	11.6	-21.7	13.00	0.12	2.02
Redcar and Cleveland	16	3.9	16.5	-24.2	2.34	1.97	10.06
Richmond upon Thames	5	2.7	12.1	-34.8	4.45	0.00	1.66
Rochdale	18	3.6	15.2	-24.7	5.36	0.16	7.44
Rotherham	16	3.3	17.2	-25.4	3.06	0.35	8.31
Rutland	9	2.9	13.8	-27	1.23	2.11	3.63
Salford	16	3.7	19.5	-21.1	4.42	0.03	7.29
Sandwell	20	2.8	14.8	-16.1	7.31	0.02	5.99
Sefton	13	2.5	13.0	-24.4	2.86	0.34	6.44
Sheffield	11	2.7	16.3	-28.7	5.05	0.29	6.22
Shropshire	9	3.3	14.6	-27.4	2.26	9.67	8.68
Slough	12	3.1	13.3	-23.6	12.65	0.11	3.92
Solihull	14	3.0	15.8	-26.4	2.63	0.21	6.54
Somerset	10	2.1	15.3	-25.8	2.25	7.70	9.27
South Gloucestershire	9	3.5	14.1	-27.4	2.39	0.98	9.83
South Tyneside	13	4.0	20.5	-21.7	3.36	0.55	11.60
Southampton	14	3.6	19.0	-22.2	6.37	0.00	4.28

Southend-on-Sea	10	3.6	11.8	-39.9	5.31	0.00	5.11
Southwark	14	3.1	17.6	-17.8	16.06	0.01	2.07
St. Helens	16	2.7	17.0	-26.3	2.83	1.12	8.93
Staffordshire	12	3.4	13.2	-24.2	2.46	2.36	8.56
Stockport	14	4.0	14.7	-33.2	3.10	0.17	6.69
Stockton-on-Tees	12	3.2	15.2	-22.7	2.98	0.94	7.66
Stoke-on-Trent	20	3.7	16.8	-18.8	4.40	0.01	7.07
Suffolk	12	2.9	13.2	-23.9	2.39	3.01	7.95
Sunderland	13	2.9	16.1	-27.4	3.43	0.56	10.45
Surrey	7	3.6	15.4	-32.9	3.47	0.37	3.65
Sutton	12	3.3	13.0	-35.3	6.20	0.15	4.87
Swindon	13	3.9	17.1	-18.4	3.33	0.18	6.72
Tameside	18	2.4	15.1	-23.4	3.94	0.02	8.15
Telford and Wrekin	13	3.6	19.1	-29.1	3.42	0.61	7.80
Thurrock	13	3.8	15.0	-21.7	6.32	0.26	7.49
Torbay	15	5.0	17.3	-32.1	2.57	0.20	7.45
Tower Hamlets	17	4.6	17.1	-13.1	18.66	0.00	2.10
Trafford	10	3.4	12.8	-34.2	3.83	0.44	5.42
Wakefield	17	3.2	14.7	-25.2	2.69	0.39	8.93
Walsall	18	2.8	13.7	-22.8	5.24	0.03	4.85
Waltham Forest	12	3.6	16.3	-15.5	16.16	0.06	2.51
Wandsworth	11	4.5	17.2	-21.8	8.77	0.00	1.08
Warrington	13	3.6	11.9	-28.3	2.41	0.33	7.40
Warwickshire	12	3.2	14.9	-33.5	2.42	1.68	5.94
West Berkshire	7	4.0	15.4	-32.4	2.26	0.56	6.33
West Sussex	10	3.2	17.4	-27.1	2.96	1.46	4.84
Westminster	14	2.9	15.8	-14.8	12.44	0.00	0.70

Wigan	19	3.1	16.3	-25.2	2.68	0.22	9.52
Wiltshire	9	3.3	15.5	-31.1	2.32	2.68	7.35
Windsor and Maidenhead	8	3.1	15.8	-22	3.61	1.14	3.93
Wirral	17	3.2	17.8	-36.2	2.24	0.18	6.10
Wokingham	7	2.5	11.4	-33.3	1.93	0.14	4.12
Wolverhampton	18	3.0	17.0	-20.8	5.98	0.00	5.50
Worcestershire	12	3.0	15.9	-29.7	2.52	2.40	7.22
York	9	2.4	12.1	-30.7	4.09	0.30	5.59

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