

Education: Children’s Experience and Education during the Covid-19 pandemic

Report of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission – May 2021

Table of Contents

Executive summary	2
Summary of recommendations	2
Part 1: Introduction and background.....	4
The national picture	4
The local picture.....	4
Council commitments.....	4
Part 2: What we did.....	5
Part 3: What we found	6
Cabinet member’s perspective	6
Headteachers’ perspective.....	7
Perspectives and experiences of young people	7
Summary of perspectives	9
Part 4: Recommendations	10
Acknowledgements	12
Appendix 1: List of interviewees and contributors.....	13
Appendix 2: Links to Identified online articles.....	14

Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a fundamental impact on all parts of society, including on children. Whilst children have proven to be less affected by the virus physically, the emotional impact and interruption to education caused by the pandemic may have a lifelong impact, permanently affecting children's life chances.

Socioeconomic and structural factors have also meant that Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly where remote schooling is concerned, with some children not having the equipment, access and space that would enable them to easily learn from home. These inequalities risk further increasing the educational attainment gap between richer and poorer pupils. The information received through our scrutiny review shows that, whilst there are real areas for improvement, schools, the Council, and other agencies have been proactive throughout the pandemic in responding to the challenges faced in delivering distanced learning whilst ensuring the wellbeing of children.

Our review into children's experiences and education during the Covid-19 pandemic, conducted during a short municipal year (due to the pandemic), has captured the views and experiences of headteachers, young people and also input from the cabinet member responsible for children and officers.

Our recommendations are focused on mental health, wellbeing and catchup and have been arrived at taking into account information received throughout the scrutiny review and other sources generally available online, particularly in relation to mental health which is an area that we have not received any direct detailed evidence on. At the end of this report are links to a number of articles and documents that provide detailed information on aspects of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic that are not covered by this report, such as children at risk, and financial hardship.

Note: Changing circumstances and developments in relation to Covid-19 since the commencement of our review, including the easing of lockdown, improved test and trace, vaccine roll-out, school and local authority interventions such as allocation of laptops and provision of internet to pupils who have needed them, work around mental health support, and overall better preparedness to manage the virus has meant that some of the evidence gathered through our sessions are no longer as relevant or have become less of an issue. Some of this information has still been included in the report for background and context.

Summary of recommendations

The Commission's full recommendations are included in Part 4 of this report.

Mental health

Recommendation 1: The Commission recommends that the Council looks at additional steps to address the expected mental health crisis amongst children and young people, in particular whether the Council can support:

- the rollout of outreach support from the Nest to primary schools
- Additional support for peer-led mental health approaches
- Teachers who seek mental health support.

Wellbeing

Recommendation 2: The Commission recommends that the Council supports efforts to:

- Ensure young people get early and sufficient access to public spaces as they reopen, particularly libraries
- Agree access to green space in public schools
- Provide additional opportunities for extra-curricular activities for children who have missed out on these over the various lockdowns.

Catch-up

Recommendation 3: The Commission recommends that the Council advocates for schools to take an evidence-informed approach to any catch-up activity and ensures young people's voices are heard in approaches taken.

Recommendation 4: The Commission recommends that the Council provide more transparent structures and outputs from its task and finish group focused on narrowing the attainment gap and sharing what works in this area.

Recommendation 5: The Commission recommends that the Council updates its Digital Strategy and relevant priorities to ensure that households with school-age children have access to high-speed fixed-line or mobile connectivity (and where still relevant, sufficient devices) to enable them to make the most of digital learning approaches.

Part 1: Introduction and background

The national picture

1. The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the whole country and government policies with advice from Public Health England to manage the virus have meant that restriction of movement has been in place for over a year, impacting on the ability for schools to continue to provide education and support to children and young people.
2. Underneath the blanket nationwide restrictions, local circumstances and the local response will have made a significant difference to the degree in which children's education have been impacted. Well-resourced schools in areas with low social deprivation have been in a better position to adapt and respond to virtual schooling, allowing for continued learning and less interruption to the education of its pupils. Conversely, schools in areas of higher social deprivation will have faced more challenges and barriers including to pupils' ability to learn outside of the normal school environment, factoring in problems with many pupils' home environments as well as broader socioeconomic factors impacting on individual households.

The local picture

3. The Council has been working with schools and other agencies to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the educational system and schools. Activity to date has ranged from support with securing devices through to helping schools interpret national policy, from making adaptations to the physical space around schools to looking at what steps can be taken to narrow the attainment gap.

Council commitments

4. Included in the refreshed Borough Plan (agreed in November 2020) under the theme Great Start in Life ("GSL") are commitments in connection with educational attainment and mental health and wellbeing, these are:
 - Support schools to close the attainment gap and ensure children can catch up on education missed during Covid-19 (GSL1)
 - Support 100% of children and young people with a diagnosable mental health need (GSL2).
5. The milestones associated with commitment GSL1 in the Borough Plan performance schedules are:
 - Attainment and learning gaps identified by schools and RAG-rated ((red, amber, green rated; a rating of the current state of affairs) for all pupils who are, or who have fallen behind.
 - Online learning platform continuing professional development offered to all schools that need it.

- All schools have identified pupils without hardware or internet access.
 - Work with Regional Schools Commissioner to gather information about academies and promote online / remote learning via school communications.
6. The measures associated with commitment GSL1 are:
- Number of maintained schools tracking attainment gaps and providing appropriate intervention.
 - Number of maintained schools ready to provide remote learning.
7. The milestone associated with commitment GSL2 is:
- Work with Southwark NHS CCG to implement the recommendations of the Southwark Joint Review of Child and Adolescent mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Services in Southwark.
8. The measures associated with commitment GSL2 are:
- Ensure that Council funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is protected and increased in line with inflation.
 - Improved emotional wellbeing amongst children and young people through an investment in universal and targeted services.
 - Emotional Health and Wellbeing Support Services in Southwark Schools – number and percentage of schools
 - Parental Support Services – support satisfaction survey

Part 2: What we did

9. July 2020 meeting – The Commission interviewed Councillor Jasmine Ali the then, cabinet member for Children, Schools and Adult Care on Council activity in connection with children returning to school.
10. October 2020 meeting – The Commission received an update from Councillor Jasmine Ali the then deputy leader and cabinet member for Children, Young People and Schools, on Council activity in respect of children returning to school. The Commission also heard from headteachers, Cassie Buchanan and Helen Ingham; Suley Muhidin, communities projects officer; and Sydney and Peter, Southwark Young Advisors.
11. January 2021 meeting – The Commission heard from children/young people from Anima Youth on their experiences of education through the pandemic. The Commission also considered a written submission from Matt Jones, chair of Southwark Association of Secondary Headteachers.
12. February 2021 meeting – The Commission drafted its initial recommendations for consultation with the deputy leader and cabinet member for children, young people and education.

13. March 2021 meeting – The Commission received feedback from Councillor Jasmine Ali, deputy leader and cabinet member for Children, Young People and Education on the Commission’s initial draft recommendations.
14. April 2021 meeting – The Commission heard further from school children based in Southwark.

Part 3: What we found

This section provides a summary of the key takeaways from the Commission’s evidence sessions held between October 2020 and April 2021.

Cabinet member’s perspective

15. The Council had widened pavements and closed some streets in order to help schools implement new ways of working in light of Covid-19. The Council purchased laptops and delivered to disadvantaged children due to delay in government issuing laptops. Following the allocation of the laptops from government it was found that more were still needed.
16. Schools had prepared carefully for welcoming pupils back and had a significant focus on mental health and wellbeing as part of the enhanced PHSE curriculum. A free mental health service had been opened by the Council online and a drop in service became available to schools in August 2020 (the Nest).
17. School children for primary, nursery and secondary schools returned to school at the beginning of September with an attendance rate of around 90%, higher than anticipated. Parents were cautious around coughs and colds, but these concerns were being addressed by schools, clinical assessments and GP referrals. Schools were following up on absences, calling and visiting homes along with early help back to school teams and social workers. Attendance monitoring was also being undertaken by the Department for Education through daily submissions and information reported back weekly.
18. There had been an increase in parents opting for home education – schools were working hard to dissuade parents from this option. In light of ongoing concerns in this area, the Council has committed additional resources to increase officer capacity.
19. The failure to successfully introduce test and trace and lack of testing centres in 2020 meant that some teachers had to travel long distances in order to get tested, removing them from the teaching environment. The need to self-isolate if members of their household had tested positive for Covid-19 also had significant impact on teacher availability and school resources due to the need to employ standby teachers adding to the stress and strain of the teaching environment.

20. A Task and Finish Group has been set up by the lead cabinet member to look at the attainment gap and what has been working in schools, with a view to sharing that information.

Headteachers' perspective

21. Disparities that already existed within and across schools had become more pronounced during the pandemic and children who are very well supported at home would continue to rise at a greater pace in contrast to children who do not have holistic support.
22. A challenge for schools was how to give school leaders the headspace and capacity to do the school improvement work as well as keeping schools open.
23. There is an increasing number of children joining reception with diagnosed or undiagnosed special needs, particularly autism. Due to Covid-19 parents had not been able to utilise the organisations that would usually be available, or have access to the networks that they might have had access to previously to direct them to the right type of school to meet their children's needs.
24. Wellbeing of staff and leadership is a key challenge for schools – staff had been impacted by an increased workload, needing to manage teaching in class as well as providing home learning for children who were unable to physically attend school. There was a personal impact on teachers and their experiences around their own mental health or mental health of their families needed to be acknowledged. One of the main challenges of schools was staff absence either because of their own symptoms or household symptoms, particularly multiple occupancy households which typically affected younger teachers who live with many other people.

Perspectives and experiences of young people

25. Education, mental health and future employment are central concerns for young people. A key challenge for many young people is the issue of space, particularly during lockdown, some having to share bedrooms with siblings or have no access to a garden. Access to a laptop or computer was also identified as an issue, whilst many young people may have smartphones, the same amount do not necessarily have exclusive access to a laptop / computer. This had posed a real challenge around accessing education.
26. There were also issues around young people transitioning from secondary school to higher education / aspirations to go to university. Particularly with concerns around receiving a poor quality education/university experience in the context of Covid-19, not being able to receive the full university experience and personal development that comes with going off to university. This situation has led to some young people deciding to put further education on hold.

27. Physical space away from the home environment is needed to enable young people to be able to build on their aspirations. Through the lockdown period young people had to be more innovative and resourceful and required space to pursue creative interests such as music, arts and crafts.
28. Self-confidence of some pupils preparing for A-levels had been lost due to them not having the GCSE exam experience. It had also been a challenge reverting back to the pre-Covid-19 work ethic that had been lost during lockdown. For some students, adapting to the shifting environment between virtual learning and returning to school was also a major challenge.
29. Young people have missed out on opportunities that would have normally been afforded them as a lot of projects that would usually be available had to be put on hold.
30. We heard from a group of young female pupils that had worked with Anima Youth, a local charity, who shared their experiences of education and returning to school. We also heard from additional Southwark students to supplement the evidence that the Commission received via Anima Youth's service users. Some of the comments and issues expressed by the pupils are set out below:
 - The way a school responds to the pandemic and communicates with pupils has an impact on how well pupils respond to change. The experience of pupils was mixed in this regard, and some pupils we heard from did attend schools in other boroughs.
 - Some pupils felt that schools were not taking into consideration pupil's personal circumstances in their expectations about home-working
 - Pupils felt they were having to teach themselves and then receiving homework on top of this
 - Several pupils were having to deal with issues like poor Wi-Fi or insufficient/absent broadband, resulting in children falling behind on work
 - Some pupils felt that the quality of some lessons had gone down significantly, and their education would benefit from even limited in-person classes/workshops to "troubleshoot", should there be another lockdown in the future
 - Uncertainty regarding whether pupils would be taking exams had caused anxiety, as had children not knowing what their grades were going to be based on
 - Pupils praised some schools that had encouraged students to talk about mental health and agreed peer-led mental health support could be helpful.
31. Pupils were asked about the idea of repeating the year if the situation had got back to normal by September 2021. All the pupils expressed concern of having to repeat the year, with expressions of feeling left behind in life, of already having missed lots of content even though online learning had been provided with concern about being able to retain what had been learnt due to preference in learning styles i.e., learning better in a classroom setting. The thought of have to repeat a year was not appealing, and there was a desire for a fresh start at university at the expected age of 18.

32. We asked students whether they felt the schools were doing much to prepare them for transition and whether they felt able to properly plan. The response from the pupils was mixed with some pupils feeling kept well informed and others feeling that the next step had been neglected within their school.
33. We asked the students what they felt most anxious about in terms of going back to school. The pupils indicated that they were anxious about whether they were going to get the desired grades, whether they were going to have to start making applications and personal statements when they hadn't fully had a normal 6th form experience. One student felt it would be helpful if there was a structured plan setting out the required focus on academics and on next steps and that this should be planned out with students so that they could mentally prepare themselves. It was also suggested that schools provide revision resources and rehearse content again as it was felt that content being taught during lockdown would not be retained as well.
34. Pupils suggested that should lockdowns be needed in the future, they would greatly prefer some sort of partial lockdown where schools are allowed to open periodically to provide pupils with some in-person support on topics or matters that they are struggling with in a remote context,, rather than having schools fully closed to pupils who are not deemed vulnerable or to be the children of key workers.
35. Pupils also suggested that some adaptations that have arisen during the Covid pandemic would be good to maintain, such as the use of Google Classroom as a tool for assigning homework, which the pupils we spoke to preferred.

Summary of perspectives

36. Overall, the key issues identified across these sessions were:
 - Releasing headspace for school leaders to enable them the capacity to focus on school improvement tasks.
 - Supporting student transitions, including SEN (from nursery to apprenticeships) getting them ready for the next stage – what is there in Southwark to support students.
 - Linking schools into networks (local and national) to enable the sharing of best practice and planning
 - The provision of a physical space(s) for young people who are not able to focus at home and need a space for extra and independent learning (libraries were closed at the time of this session, but do continue to have limited access).
 - Provision of online virtual learning spaces to enable students to be able work together and in-person troubleshooting sessions in the case of any future lockdowns.
 - Provision of reliable home broadband connections to facilitate virtual learning

- Management of place planning and support to parents/carers (particularly in relation to SEN), so that parents are picking the right school for their child, especially whilst parents/carers are not able to visit schools due to the pandemic.
- Ensuring any approach to catch-up for students does not increase the strain on pupils, and emphasises extracurricular activity too.

Part 4: Recommendations

Mental health

37. **Recommendation 1:** The Commission supports the Council’s efforts to better support the mental health of children and young people as outlined in submissions to the Commission and the announcements in February’s Council Assembly. **The Commission recommends that the Council looks at additional steps to address the expected mental health crisis amongst children and young people,** in particular whether the Council can **support:**
- **the rollout of outreach support from the Nest to primary schools** as well as secondary schools
 - **Additional support for peer-led mental health approaches** (e.g. peer counselling and mental health first aid training) in schools
 - **Teachers who seek mental health support,** and aid efforts to ensure that teachers do not have any mental health support sought via the school or otherwise flagged on their records.

Wellbeing

38. **Recommendation 2:** The Commission recommends that the Council supports efforts to:
- **Ensure young people get early and sufficient access to public spaces** as they reopen, particularly libraries
 - **Agree access to green space in public schools** for Southwark’s children and more generally ensure young people have sufficient access to green space and outdoor activities
 - **Provide additional opportunities for extra-curricular activities for children** who have missed out on these over the various lockdowns.

Catch-up

39. **Recommendation 3:** The Commission recommends that the Council advocates for schools to take an evidence-informed approach to any catch-up activity and ensures young people’s voices are heard in approaches taken. The Commission recommends the Council seeks to understand children’s concerns that intense catch-up activity over the summer could put further strain on students and should not be done at the expense of providing children with opportunities to take part in additional extracurricular activity. This is particularly important given that children that such

social experiences have been missed as a result of the pandemic and would otherwise play an important role in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing.

40. **Recommendation 4: The Commission recommends that the Council provide more transparent structures and outputs from its task and finish group focused on narrowing the attainment gap** and sharing what works in this area.

41. **Recommendation 5: The Commission recommends that the Council updates its Digital Strategy and relevant priorities to ensure that households with school-age children have access to high-speed fixed-line or mobile connectivity (and where still relevant, sufficient devices) to enable them to make the most of digital learning approaches.** The Commission acknowledges the fantastic efforts of schools and the Council to address immediate access and device needs of students across the borough. However, the pandemic has highlighted an important new front for the Council's evolving approach to digital inclusion which will need sustained long term focus.

Acknowledgements

The Chair would like to thank the Head of Scrutiny, Everton Roberts for providing invaluable support to the Commission in its investigations and assisting with the drafting of this report; as well as to all the officers and lead cabinet member, Cllr Jasmine Ali, who provided a wealth of helpful information to the Commission; and all of the people who spoke to the Commission. In particular the Chair extends his thanks to the children who spoke to the Commission and openly shared the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on their education and wellbeing. Finally, the Chair would also like to give a special thank you to all of the Commission members for their ongoing commitment to improving the lives of Southwark's children; to Cllr Anood Al-Samerai, the Vice-Chair of the Commission; and to the reserve members who were particularly active in our investigations this year: Cllr Radha Burgess, Cllr Jason Ochere and Cllr Humaira Ali.

Cllr Peter Babudu

Chair, Education and Local Economy Commission

Appendix 1: List of interviewees and contributors

Commission members

Councillor Peter Babudu (Chair)
Councillor Anood Al-Samerai (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Karl Eastham
Councillor Eleanor Kerslake
Councillor Richard Leeming
Councillor Eliza Mann
Councillor Michael Situ
Martin Brecknell (co-opted member – Education)
Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer (co-opted member – Education)
Nicole Gordon (co-opted member – Business)
Councillor Humaira Ali (Reserve member)
Councillor Radha Burgess (Reserve member)
Councillor Jason Ochere (Reserve member)

Other Council contributors

Councillor Jasmine Ali
Nina Dohel, Director of Education
Jenny Brennan
Suley Muhidin, Communities Projects Officer (Young People Lead)
Southwark Young Advisors, Peter and Sydney
Everton Roberts, Head of Scrutiny
Alfred Hamilton, Intern, Scrutiny Team

Other contributors

Cassie Buchanan, Headteacher
Helen Ingham, Headteacher
Matt Jones, Headteacher
Anima Youth (staff and service users)
Southwark students

Appendix 2: Links to Identified online articles

The Children's Society: Impact of Covid-19 on Children and Young People - <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-children-and-young-people-briefing.pdf>.

BBC article - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55863841>

LSE report on the effect of school closures - <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cepCovid-19-001.pdf>

Impact on Children's Mental Health - <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/impacts-lockdown-mental-health-children-and-young-people>

Concerns over Children Becoming Less Active - <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/mar/05/survey-shows-uk-parents-concern-over-Covid-effect-on-childrens-activity>

BBC Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people - <https://www.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CN1081-Impact-Report.pdf>.

BBC How Covid-19 is Changing the World's Children - <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200603-how-Covid-19-is-changing-the-worlds-children>.