A NEW AND BETTER NORMAL

Children and Young People’s Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Main Report

August 2021
FOREWORD

We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just one oar.¹

The beginning of 2020 was an optimistic time for us in Northern Ireland as the New Year heralded the return of the NI Executive and Assembly with an ambitious programme outlined the New Decade New Approach deal. As I read the document assessing progress on children’s issues I felt, whilst not all children’s rights issues were being progressed, so many would be, including poverty, education, mental health, palliative care and age discrimination. None of us were prepared for what followed and the effect that Covid-19 would have on all our lives. Nor could we envisage that by the end of March, two months after restoration, we would all be in lockdown and our children would not be attending school.

As I write this, 16 months after that first lockdown we still do not know the full long-term impacts of this pandemic on the lives of children and young people. Nevertheless, as we seek to ‘build back fairer’ we know enough to be able to set the trajectory of travel. Hence this report. Much has been written and discussed about the known impact of the pandemic on our children’s education, physical, mental and emotional health; and as the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, it is important that we provide a synthesis of all this work filling in the gaps with our own areas of inquiry and providing a clear analysis and a set of recommendations as to how we shape the future.

We are not in this together and I utterly refute the notion that the pandemic has affected us all in the same way and this report demonstrates the distinct experience of so many different groups of children. The pandemic has laid bare the deep inequalities in our society particularly with regard to poverty and disability. As the quote above suggests yes we have all been in the same storm but the boats that we have been in to help us navigate that storm have been very different.

For many years the discourse about poverty and its impact on children and young people has been a superficial one and in some respects negligent. Successive governments have refused to effectively address this issue or to see the impact that public funding cuts, particularly to benefits, have had on children. Whilst it has been positive that we have tried to address the awful consequences of food poverty, period poverty and fuel poverty, they are ‘sticking plaster’ solutions - we must end this compartmentalisation of children’s lives and end child poverty.

It was right, during the initial lockdown, that all energies were focussed on controlling the virus and protecting our elderly and vulnerable; we have much to learn about how we care for our vulnerable older population. However, as the pandemic progressed it became clear that too many of our children and families were struggling. As you read this report it will be apparent that services across all sectors worked tirelessly to respond to need but restrictions and regulations did not always provide the assistance necessary. We know that schools are much more than places where children and young people formally

¹ https://www.damianbarr.com/latest/tag/We+are+not+all+in+the+same+boat.+We+are+all+in+the+same+storm.
learn, they are places where they socialise, are nurtured, kept safe and well. The inability of the education system to be creative and respond in a timely manner to emerging issues has been deeply frustrating. The feeling of abandonment by families of children with special educational needs - particularly those in special schools - is real and justified. Schools were given insufficient support to stay open for the children and families who needed this support.

This report also highlights young people’s frustration at the decision-making processes within Government particularly the Department of Education; it also starkly lays out how young people felt ignored and marginalised with insufficient information provided to them and little meaningful engagement.

I listened to this young person quoted below (referencing a press report) and still it distresses and shocks me that for months he felt like this.

“...do you remember the way they said about beds, that they only had specific rooms for you know normal kids ........ and so the kids with special needs if they would have had to make the hard choice to put them down or let the other one live, they were saying this sort of stuff.”

Too many of our children’s lives have been devastated by the pandemic and this devastation must be alleviated as a matter of urgency. If, as you read this report, you think this is not about Covid-19 but also about inequalities and the need to properly realise children’s rights then that is correct. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of the lives of thousands of families in NI but they are fragilities that have been known about for years. When I became Commissioner in 2015 my priorities were poverty, educational inequalities and mental health. Unsurprisingly these are the issues that have been highlighted in the last 18 months. We do not need a ‘Covid Recovery Plan’ for Children we need to see the proper implementation of the Programme for Government, the Children and Young People’s Strategy, the Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and a child rights impact assessment (CRIA) approach to relevant policies, strategies and delivery plans. We must not waste our energies on new strategies but work with children, families and communities to implement what is necessary. Poor implementation of children’s rights makes vulnerable children even more so during emergency situations.

I also need to be clear that I genuinely believe that the NI Executive and government worked hard during the Pandemic and it is intended that this report will be of assistance in progressing the learning. I present this report and my recommendations to our duty bearers.

We are grateful to those at QUB and the children and young people who informed and participated in the preparation of this report. We also would like to thank the professionals who participated in the QUB research and the organisations that provided information or facilitated focus groups. I am personally indebted to all the staff at NICCY who have worked tirelessly on it and will continue to do so as we monitor implementation of the recommendations.

“People just assumed we were going to be irresponsible. We were always just told to think of older people but we were thinking about them and wanted to do our best. Who was thinking of us?”

Koulla Yiasouma
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
1. INTRODUCTION
‘Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have thankfully been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 - at least to date – the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good. This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong. Moreover, the harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations. There are three main channels through which children are affected by this crisis: infection with the virus itself; the immediate socio-economic impacts of measures to stop transmission of the virus and end the pandemic; and the potential longer-term effects of delayed implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals’


The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global crisis during the course of which national governments have necessarily had to introduce restrictive measures to protect the population from the spread of the virus. These restrictions have had a severe impact on the rights and best interests of children and young people. While the COVID-19 pandemic was a health emergency, the impact on children’s health has been limited, no doubt in no small part due to the public policy responses, through emergency legislation and including restrictions on freedom of movement and association. Nonetheless, these in turn impacted on outcomes for children across a much wider range of areas, directly and indirectly. As an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report noted,

‘Evidence from multiple high-income countries clearly shows that how a government responds to a crisis (whether directly for children or not) can have serious implications for child and family poverty, parental care, child mortality, health, nutrition, learning outcomes, parental labour market attachment, gender equality, parental mental health and suicide, homelessness and more.’

The aim of this report therefore is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of children and young people across Northern Ireland. In assessing the impact of the pandemic, we have looked at several key areas including health, social/recreational activities, family life, education and economic wellbeing. We have placed a particular focus on vulnerable groups including children in care, children with disabilities, and children at risk of domestic violence and/or abuse.

NICCY has examined the Northern Ireland Executive’s response to the pandemic including the introduction and easing of successive lockdowns and the introduction of emergency legislation. We have analysed the steps that the Executive has taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the education, health and social, and family life of children and young people and to ensure young people and their families do not fall into poverty.

Our analysis has been informed by the statement issued by the UN Committee on

the Rights of the Child (the Committee) on 8 April 2020 warning of the grave physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and calling on States to protect the rights of children.\footnote{UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2020), Statement on Impacts of COVID Pandemic on Children and Young People. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT/CRC/STA/9095&Lang=en}

The Committee expressed concern about the situation of children globally, particularly those in situations of vulnerability, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It pointed out that many children would be gravely affected physically, emotionally and psychologically, especially in countries that had declared states of emergencies and mandatory lockdowns, and outlined 11 recommendations to states, to safeguard children’s rights during the pandemic. In our analysis we have assessed how far the Executive has complied with the statement issued by the Committee on 8 April and, in particular, how far they have introduced measures which specifically address the 11 recommendations identified.

Chapters of the report focus on each of these recommendations while at the same time looking at the impact of the pandemic on children’s rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) more generally.

### The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Recommendations to states on protecting children from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

1. **Consider the health, social, educational, economic and recreational impacts of the pandemic on the rights of the child.** Although initially declared for short terms, it becomes clear that declarations of States of emergencies and/or disaster may be maintained for longer periods, leading to longer periods of restrictions on the enjoyment of human rights. The Committee recognizes that in crisis situations, international human rights law exceptionally permits measures that may restrict the enjoyment of certain human rights in order to protect public health. However, such restrictions must be imposed only when necessary, be proportionate and kept to an absolute minimum. Additionally, while acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic may have a significant and adverse impact on the availability of financial resources, these difficulties should not be regarded as an impediment to the implementation of the Convention. Nevertheless, States should ensure that responses to the pandemic, including restrictions and decisions on allocation of resources, reflect the principle of the best interests of the child.

2. **Explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities.** Such solutions should include supervised outdoor activities at least once a day which respect physical distance protocols and other hygiene standards, and child-friendly cultural and artistic activities on TV, radio and online.

3. **Ensure that online learning does not exacerbate existing inequalities or replace student-teacher interaction.** Online learning is a creative alternative to classroom learning but poses challenges for children who have limited or no access to technology or the Internet or do not have adequate parental
support. Alternative solutions should be available for such children to benefit from the guidance and support provided by teachers.

4. **Activate immediate measures to ensure that children are fed nutritious food** during the period of emergency, disaster or lockdown, as many children receive their only nutritious meal through school feeding schemes.

5. **Maintain the provision of basic services for children including healthcare, water, sanitation and birth registration.** Despite the increasing pressure on health systems and the scarcity of resources, children should not be denied access to health care, including to testing and a potential future vaccine, to COVID-19 – related and COVID-19 – unrelated medical treatment, mental health services and treatment for pre-existing conditions. Children should also have access to clean water and sanitation facilities during the period of emergency, disaster or lockdown. Birth registration services should not be suspended.

6. **Define core child protection services as essential and ensure that they remain functioning and available, including home visits when necessary, and provide professional mental health services for children living in lockdown.** Confinement may expose children to increased physical and psychological violence at home, or force children to stay in homes that are overcrowded and lack the minimum conditions of habitability. Children with disabilities and behavioural problems, as well as their families, may face additional difficulties behind closed doors. States should strengthen phone and online reporting and referral systems as well as sensitization and awareness activities through TV, radio and online channels. Strategies to mitigate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should also include specific measures to protect children, particularly those living in poverty and lacking access to adequate housing.

7. **Protect children whose vulnerability is further increased by the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic.** These include children with disabilities; children living in poverty; children in street situations; migrant, asylum-seeking, refugee and internally displaced children; minority and indigenous children; children with underlying health conditions including HIV/AIDS; children deprived of their liberty or confined in police lock-up facilities, prisons, secure care centres, migrant detention centres or camps; and children living in institutions. States should respect the right of every child to non-discrimination in its measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic as well as take targeted measures to protect children in vulnerable situations.

8. **Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.** Many States have adopted measures to restrict visits and contact opportunities for children living in institutions or deprived of their liberty, including children confined in police institutions, prisons, secure centres, migration detention centres or camps. While these restrictive measures can be seen as necessary in the short term, over long periods they will have a marked negative effect on children. Children should at all times be allowed to maintain regular contact
with their families, and if not in person, through electronic communication or telephone. If the period of emergency, disaster or State-ordered confinement is extended, consideration should be given to reassessing the measures that prohibit such visits. Children in migration situations should not be detained nor separated from their parents if accompanied.

9. Prevent the arrest or detention of children for violating State guidance and directives relating to COVID-19, and ensure that any child who was arrested or detained is immediately returned to his or her family.

10. Disseminate accurate information about COVID-19 and how to prevent infection in languages and formats that are child-friendly and accessible to all children including children with disabilities, migrant children and children with limited access to the Internet.

In addition to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s statement, in April 2020 the UN also published a more detailed Policy Brief: ‘The Impact of Covid on Children’, which provided three overarching recommendations:

- Rebalance the combination of interventions to minimise the impact of standard physical distancing and lockdown strategies on children in low-income countries and communities and expand social protection programmes to reach the most vulnerable children.
- Prioritise the continuity of child-centred services, with a particular focus on equity of access – particularly in relation to schooling, nutrition programmes, immunisation and other maternal and newborn care, and community-based child protection programmes.
- Provide practical support to parents and caregivers, including how to talk about the pandemic with children, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, and tools to help support their children’s learning.

This briefing made the point that children would not be impacted solely at the time of the pandemic, but potentially could feel the negative impact throughout their lifetime if the response and recovery from the pandemic exacerbates inequalities for children and families. Conversely, well-designed, family-
focused policies could have wider, long term positive benefits for society, as a UNICEF report has stated:

‘No one group in society better represents the future than the child population. Therefore, child-sensitive approaches to crisis recovery – ensuring that children are protected from harm, that their services are ring-fenced, and that they are seen as a priority group in the response – are not simply driven by good intentions, but should be seen as vital to ensuring that future generations are equipped to avoid crises such as COVID-19. Should the responses to the present crisis fail to fully account for the impact that public policy decisions will have on all children, progress towards to the SDGs is also at risk.’

Political context to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland

As 2020 started, Northern Ireland was in the middle of a political crisis where the main political parties could not reach agreement on the basis to form an Executive, and by this point Northern Ireland had been without a government for three years. While the civil service sought to ensure ongoing delivery of the government departments and their agencies, increasingly the lack of Ministers to make decisions meant that many important developments were halted.

Over this period of political vacuum, the Brexit negotiations were taken forward between the UK government negotiators and those representing the EU. Given Northern Ireland was the only part of the UK that would have a land border with the EU, and the way in which EU membership had played an important facilitatory role in the Belfast Agreement, the absence of a Northern Ireland government to represent the interests of the population was extremely problematic. With the UK formally leaving the EU at the end of January 2020, and the third anniversary of the absence of government in NI was approaching, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Julian Smith, and the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, hosted talks and brokered agreement between the parties. On the basis of the New Decade, New Approach Deal (NDNA), on 11 January 2020 a new NI Executive was formed and the Assembly restored.

The NDNA document drew together a range of commitments for action from the new Executive, many of which had previously been in progress but had been delayed due to the absence of the Executive, while others reflected problems that had emerged or worsened in the political vacuum. A number of these commitments were particularly important to ensure effective delivery on children’s rights including:

- Addressing problems with the provision of health and social care services through reconfiguration of hospital provision, delivering reforms on health and social care and introducing a new action plan on waiting times;
- Publishing a new Mental Health Action Plan and Strategy, to improve delivery of mental health services;
- Addressing resourcing pressures in schools and publishing an independent review of education provision;
- Overcoming divisions in education through supporting educating children of different backgrounds together, and addressing the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background

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• Extending existing welfare mitigation measures beyond March 2020 which were due to expire;

• Establishing an Ad-Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights; and


The Executive was to develop a Programme for Government to outline how it would deliver on these commitments, but within two months the COVID-19 pandemic was to demand the full attention of the government, and population. Having observed the emergence of the virus in the Wuhan region of China, and then its sudden spread across a number of European countries, the first case of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland was diagnosed on 27 February 2020 and the first COVID-related death was on 19 March 2020. Schools and non-essential shops in Northern Ireland were closed from 23 March 2020, people were asked to work from home, there was no meeting up between households and regulations came into force on 28 March 2020 to enforce stay at home guidelines unless people had reasonable excuses not to do so.

The Coronavirus Bill, containing a range of measures applying to each of the four jurisdictions of the UK, was introduced at Westminster on 19 March 2020, and on 24 March 2020, the Assembly passed a Legislative Consent Motion granting that the Bill should extend to Northern Ireland. The Coronavirus Act 2020 temporarily amended the 1967 Public Health Act, and these changes will apply for a period of two years until March 2022. The amended Public Health Act introduced a range of legislative changes including:

• emergency registration provisions for medical and social work professionals;

• powers to restrict public assembly;

• powers of detention and other powers to deal with ‘potentially infectious persons’;

• powers relating to travel (medical examination, detention, isolation or quarantine of persons; disinfection or decontamination of persons and things; prohibiting or regulating entry or exit of persons); and

• powers relating to mental health and mental capacity.

The Act provided for the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to make changes without prior Assembly approval if it was deemed ‘proportionate’ and ‘necessary’ to do so. Over the first twelve months to March 21, there were approximately 40 amendments to the regulations, as well as additional changes in relation to international travel regulations and standalone regulations such as those regarding face coverings. Some of these have been made on the same day as the decision or shortly thereafter which means that the usual consultation and scrutiny processes have not been operationally possible. Whilst processes have been established to improve risk-benefit assessments of proposed changes to regulations and restrictions through legislation, NICCY has raised concerns about the lack consultation with the office with respect to the development of emergency coronavirus legislation and its impact on children’s rights.7

As the pandemic progressed, restrictions were eased over the summer months (2020), with a return to school from September –

7 For example, in meeting between NICCY and Chief Medical Officer, 10.03.21; in various correspondence with the Department of Education in relation to the Temporary Modification of Education Duties.
December 2020, interrupted by an extended half-term break in October 2020. A second full lockdown came into force at the end of December 2020. Schools remained closed after the Christmas break, apart from Special Schools and for vulnerable children and children of key workers. Non-essential shops were closed and the government advised people to work from home where possible. Northern Ireland embarked on the programme of easing lockdown restrictions from 23 April 2021, and despite an increase in cases linked to the Delta variant at the time of writing, the removal of restrictions has continued on a phased basis.

The work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People through the COVID-19 pandemic

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with ‘The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order’ (2003) to ‘safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland’. Under Article 7 of this legislation, NICCY has a statutory duty to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities, and to provide advice on these matters.

In carrying out her functions, the Commissioner’s paramount consideration is the right of the child or young person, having particular regard to their wishes and feelings. In exercising her functions, the Commissioner is required to have regard to all relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and to the role of parents in the upbringing and development of children. The Commissioner’s remit is children and young people up to 18 years, or 21 years, if the young person has a disability or experience of being in the care of social services.\(^8\)

The Commissioner is supported by a staff team of 25, led by the Chief Executive, working in a Legal and Investigations team, a Policy and Participation team and a Corporate Services team. In addition, she is advised by the NICCY Youth Panel, currently involving 154 young people and, through a range of methods is informed by the experiences and opinions of children and young people more generally across Northern Ireland.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, NICCY has consistently scrutinised the response of the Northern Ireland Executive, its departments and agencies, through information requests and meetings. Our focus was on providing advice, in ‘real time’ as the crisis unfolded. While much of this can be found in our formal advice papers on our website (www.niccy.org), a significant amount of this was delivered in meetings with Ministers, politicians, civil servants and other professionals responsible for the delivery of children’s services, and in evidence sessions at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

NICCY was also very aware of the concerns of children and young people, and their families, particularly in the early stages, when there was little in the way of information accessible to children, and parents were suddenly having to address many practical difficulties in terms of supporting their children’s education, allaying anxieties, and understanding the restrictions applied.\(^9\) We therefore established an information page

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8 In this report we variously refer to ‘children’ and ‘young people’. When using either term we are intending to be inclusive of all children and young people under our remit, unless otherwise stated.

9 See Coronavirus - information for children & young people and parents (niccy.org)
on our website to hold information relevant to children and young people and their families, and the Commissioner made frequent statements and posted videos on social media where she sought to explain recent developments and reassure children and young people.\textsuperscript{10}

In addition, over this time the Commissioner’s Legal and Investigations team provided support to individual children and young people experiencing rights breaches in relation to a wide range of issues, many of which related to the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the major changes affecting the education sector due to the pandemic, unsurprisingly most COVID-19 queries received by our Legal team related to education. These varied from calls to cancel exams, grading problems, the use of masks and issues with the post primary transfer process. Other queries related to health waiting lists for children with additional needs, delays in health assessments, access to respite services curtailed due to restrictions and a lack of access to digital devices required for home schooling.

We publish this report at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic response, as the Northern Ireland Executive is starting to move forwards to develop its COVID-19 Recovery Plan. It is critical that this takes into account the impacts of the pandemic response on children and young people, and has a focus on the longer term goals for them. The report aims to draw out key learning from the pandemic response, to inform the continuing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Executive’s Recovery Plan, and also to inform government responses to any future emergencies.

\textsuperscript{10} See, for example Statement from the Commissioner on Covid 19 (1 April 20) (niccy.org); https://youtu.be/JMpBiZy4L9E
Hearing directly from children and young people throughout the pandemic has been important for NICCY, to inform our interventions and advice to government. It has also been important to inform this report, and the recommendations it contains. The NICCY Youth Panel have worked with the Commissioner and her staff throughout the pandemic and have provided an important ‘reality check’ as to the difficulties they, their families and their peers were experiencing. As outlined in the methodology section, they have worked with us to engage with children and young people more widely across Northern Ireland, recognising that the Panel couldn’t reflect all the views and experiences of children and young people, and that there were particular groups whose experience of the pandemic would be affected by their personal circumstances and that we needed to be proactive in hearing their voices.

Our report was also informed by many other organisations working with or on behalf of children and young people. At the beginning of the first lockdown NICCY contacted a wide range of organisations asking them to alert us to any child rights breaches that they became aware of as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and over subsequent months we were contacted by several. Many have also gathered information and published reports on the impact of COVID-19 on the children and families with which they worked, or on specific children’s issues. These reports have proved excellent sources of information and we have drawn extensively on these in this report.

**Methodology**

In preparing this report, NICCY has sought to hear from a wide range of children and young people about their experiences of the pandemic, and through surveys and focus groups have heard from a total of 4,385 young people. We have:

- Drawn upon our advice to government over the duration of the pandemic to date;
- Commissioned modules on two surveys with children and young people – the Kids Life and Times Survey (KLTS) and the Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) – from ARK\(^\text{11}\) who are based at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). These surveys sought views from children and young people directly and asked them about the impact of COVID-19;
- Commissioned a detailed qualitative research report from the Centre for Children’s Rights at QUB. Researchers engaged with professionals from the statutory and voluntary sector working with children and young people on the impact of COVID-19 on the planning and delivery of services to children and young people across the 11 key areas identified by UNCRC;
- Engaged directly with groups of children and young people who may have been ‘vulnerable’, in terms of the uneven impact of COVID-19 and the response, by running a series of focus groups, facilitated by voluntary sector groups;
- Requested and analysed data from government and research literature from other sources including statutory bodies, voluntary sector organisations, and academic institutions; and
- Identified learning relating to the current COVID-19 emergency to inform recommendations on planning for the COVID-19 recovery.

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\(^{11}\) ARK is a Northern Ireland social policy hub, established in 2000 by researchers at Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, with the primary goal to increase the accessibility and use of academic data and research.
**Data Sources**

**Surveys of children and young people**

NICCY commissioned modules in two surveys - the Kid Life and Times Survey (KLTS) and the Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) to gather information on the experiences of children and young people during the Covid pandemic.¹²

The questions were developed through engagement with the NICCY Youth Panel. They reviewed the 11 recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Statement, and identified the areas that would be appropriate to include in a survey, recognising that some recommendations could only be assessed through accessing other data sources. NICCY staff then worked with the Youth Panel members to draft a ‘wish list’ of questions and then to reduce these to ones they considered most essential. Together we then adapted these to suit the age ranges for the two surveys. ARK staff advised on amending these to ensure they were robust.

The KLTS is an annual survey which has been running since 2008. It uses online questionnaires and is targeted at P7 children in primary schools across Northern Ireland. The fieldwork for the 2020 KLTS was carried out between 12 October 2020 and 26 February 2021. There were approximately 25,450 P7 age pupils attending 842 primary schools (this included P7 age children in special and independent schools). Questions on the KLTS 2020 related to home and family, school and bullying, shared education and the impact of COVID-19 on children’s rights. With regard to the latter, the survey was necessarily focused on the experiences of children during the first lockdown.

The response rate to the survey was lower than in previous years. 94 out of 842 schools participated in the survey, representing 11% of schools. In previous years the response rate was usually over 20% but a lower response rate in 2020 was not unexpected given the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of lockdowns and school closures throughout the fieldwork period. A total of 2,242 children logged on to the survey out of a target population of 25,450 P7 age children which represents a response rate of approximately 9 percent.

The YLTS is an annual survey which has been run since 1998 and records the views of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues such as community relations, health, politics, sectarianism and education. By inviting respondents to suggest issues for the next year’s survey, ARK makes sure that the topics covered are relevant to the lives of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland today. In this year’s survey, young people were also asked several questions specifically related to COVID-19, devised as explained above, by the NICCY Youth Panel.

Exceptional circumstances in 2020 and 2021 meant that the survey field originally planned for the last quarter of 2020 had to be postponed to May 2021. While the original intention was to include very similar questions as in the KLTS, the delay in fieldwork required that some of these were adjusted to reflect that there had been a second lockdown.

The survey sample was taken from the Child Benefit Register. As in previous years, the sample for the 2020/21 survey was provided to ARK directly by HMRC. The sample for the 2020/21 survey included the names and addresses of 5,000 randomly selected young people in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16th birthday in April, May or June. 5,000 young people were invited to participate in the survey and the response rate was 42%.

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¹² Throughout this report we refer to the data from these two modules by the shorthand ‘KLTS’ and ‘YLTS’.
From 2019 the YLTS has moved, primarily, to online completion although participants have the option to request paper or phone completion. All administration of the mailout for the survey was undertaken by an independent mailing company. Fieldwork was conducted in May 2021.

Queen’s University Belfast Qualitative Research Report

NICCY commissioned a qualitative research report from Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) to help inform our response: Corr, M-L, Byrne, B., McAlister, S., Templeton, M. (2021), The Impact of COVID-19 on the Planning and Delivery of Children’s Services: A Rights Review, (Belfast: NICCY). The overall purpose of the project was to identify the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the planning and delivery of services to children and young people. It aimed to identify the challenges experienced by professionals and practitioners working in statutory and voluntary sectors and examine the ways in which they responded whilst resolving the issues presented. The analysis assessed these in the context of the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland with a view to aiding NICCY in framing recommendations for future emergency planning.

- Rapid review of literature. The review focused primarily on literature relating to the context of the pandemic in Northern Ireland and drew on sources related to a number of substantive issues (for example, education, health, family life, play and leisure). The key aim of the review was to inform the subsequent stages of the project including consultation with NICCY staff and Youth Panel, the recruitment of participants and the development of interview schedules;
- Consultation with NICCY Youth Panel and NICCY Policy & Legal Teams. The purpose of these consultations was to inform the design of the study;
- Interviews with professionals and practitioners representing statutory and voluntary sectors. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out with professionals and practitioners involved in the planning and delivery of children’s services in the statutory and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland. Interviews and focus groups aimed to gather participants’ views on the challenges faced in their role and the impact that these had on the lives of children and young people they work with or on behalf of. Interviews also examined the ways in which participants responded to challenges, their views on areas of good practice and success and examples of where they thought responses could be improved.

Focus groups with groups of vulnerable children and young people

While this report addresses the impact of COVID-19 on children’s rights generally, it has a particular focus on the rights of particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people. Based on our work over the COVID-19 pandemic, and cognisant of the types of groups the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child had highlighted, we identified a number of groups of children and young people that we wanted to hear from directly, to understand how their particular circumstances may have affected their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the government response. A number of voluntary sector organisations facilitated access to these groups of young people, generously providing support both to NICCY and to the young people to ensure
that their voices were heard. Given the public health restrictions, the majority of these took place on Zoom. While this allowed the focus groups to happen, nevertheless this proved challenging as many of the young people were experiencing ‘Zoom fatigue’.

However, despite these challenges, we engaged with 74 young people through 11 focus groups and four written submissions. Hearing from these young people was extremely informative, as we heard about many experiences for the first time, and this highlights the importance of finding ways of hearing voices of the ‘lesser heard’ groups. We have taken steps to ensure that the voices of these children comes through in the report by quoting them directly and using the following codes to associate the quote with the group (see above).

**Ethical review**

Ethical approval was sought and received from appropriate bodies for all the research undertaken by, or on behalf of NICCY to inform this report. NICCY undertook an internal ethical review process in relation to its focus group research, and also provided approval for the QUB research. The QUB researchers, and ARK team also went through the QUB ethical review process in relation to the QUB report, the YLTS and KLTS. Finally, one organisation that facilitated a focus group with a group of vulnerable young people also required NICCY to complete their ethical review process in advance of the meeting.
Associated reports
This is the Commissioner’s comprehensive report outlining in detail NICCY’s analysis of the impact of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s rights in Northern Ireland. While it is the main report, it is accompanied by a number of other publications and communications:

- A shorter ‘summary report’ providing a brief overview of the findings and recommendations;
- A report providing more detail in relation to the experiences of children and young people through the COVID-19 pandemic, including further analysis of the KLTS and YLTS findings, and the focus groups conducted by NICCY;
- An ‘easy read’ summary of the report’s findings;
- Information communicating the findings to children and young people; and

This full suite is available to download from the NICCY website.

“They should listen to young people more and take their needs into consideration as much as they do with adults. Just because we are younger does not mean we don’t matter as much. Our education was greatly affected and our mental health as a whole was equally as greatly impacted. I felt as though, during the pandemic, we young people were almost blamed for the spread of the virus when the vast majority of us did everything we could to protect the older generation. But instead of listening to us and seeing we were trying to help, the government instead let the minority represent the majority. I would like the government to listen to us more and take us into consideration when they make decisions, especially on things that impact us such as education.’

Young person, YLTS

‘The government is talking to teachers, headmasters, and classroom helpers but have never bothered to talk to children. They should ask, as this survey has asked, do children feel safe in school, are they struggling with the fear of the virus...’

Young person, KLTS
2. POVERTY
Introduction

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) confers on all children the right to an adequate standard of living. While this recognises that the primary responsibility for this falls to parents or others responsible for the child, it also outlines the requirement on States to provide support to implement this right, with a particular focus on material assistance and support programmes, particularly in relation to nutrition, clothing and housing. Article 26 focuses specifically on the right of children to benefit from social security, taking into account the resources and circumstances both of the child, and their parents or those responsible for the child.

In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) examined the UK and devolved governments’ progress in implementing the UNCRC. One area of particular concern was the limited progress in eradicating child poverty, and the Committee encouraged UK Governments to establish clear accountability mechanisms for the eradication of child poverty, including the development of devolved child poverty eradication strategies, re-establishing SMART targets and regular monitoring and reporting of progress. The Committee also commented on the impact of welfare ‘reforms’ on children and young people and asked the UK Government to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the impact of all the social security and tax credit changes and, where necessary, revise these in order to ensure that the best interests of children were given primary consideration. Finally, there were also recommendations in relation to food poverty and homelessness.1

As can be seen from the Committee’s comments, child poverty was of concern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, around one in four children (22%) were living in poverty, equivalent to more than 100,000 children.2 Despite ambitious commitments in the Child Poverty Act 2010, and subsequent Child Poverty Strategies in Northern Ireland, there had been no sustained change in the levels of child poverty over the 18 years the data had been collated, with rates fluctuating from 23% to 28%. Indeed, children had consistently been the age group most likely to be experiencing poverty in Northern Ireland. Compared to 23% of children, only 15% of working age adults and 13% of pensioners were in poverty in 2019-20.3 While levels of unemployment were low, Northern Ireland had the highest figures for economic inactivity across the UK, and the levels of child poverty in working households had been increasing for many years. By March 2020, two in three children in poverty in Northern Ireland (66%) were living in working households.4

The New Decade, New Approach document agreed in January 2020, contained several Executive commitments to support working families and the most vulnerable, including commitments to extend existing welfare mitigation measures, develop and implement an Anti-poverty and Child Poverty Strategies,5 increase social housing and affordable home starts, and publish a Childcare Strategy. However, the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic led to delays in the delivery of these

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid
5 New Decade, New Approach January 2020
commitments, and indeed provided further challenges in relation to tackling child poverty.

This chapter of the report outlines how the COVID-19 Pandemic and the response to this impacted on the economy, employment and the incomes of families with children, the impact this had on children and young people, and how government, statutory agencies and the VCS sector responded. Finally, it outlines recommendations that should inform the Northern Ireland Executive’s actions to address child poverty as it seeks to start the recovery process.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic response on the economy and family incomes

Impact on industry

The Northern Ireland Quarterly Index of Services (IOS) for Q4 of 2020 reported a quarterly decrease of 5.0% in services output and a decrease of 6.6% over the full year. In contrast, the UK IOS output experienced a small increase of 0.6% over the same quarter and a decrease of 7.3% over the year. When the most recent four quarters are compared to the previous four quarters, the NI services sector decreased by 9.4% while the UK services sector decreased by 8.9%. The most significant impact was on hospitality and retail - sectors employing higher numbers of young people. Over the months following the first lockdown the UK Government introduced programmes that sought to prevent job losses and protect the economy.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employed Income Support Scheme

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) was announced on 20 March 2020 and was initially only intended to run between 1 March 2020 and 31 May 2020. However, it was subsequently extended on a number of occasions, most recently until 30 September 2021. Employers were able to apply for a grant that covered furloughed employees’ usual monthly wage costs for unworked hours, up to a cap of £2,500 per month. Furloughed employees were entitled to furlough pay of no less than 80% of their usual monthly wage costs for unworked hours, up to a cap of £2,500 a month. From 1 July 2021, the level of grant was reduced each month and employers asked to contribute towards the cost of their furloughed employees’ wages. Employers could ‘top up’ the wages to make up the gap between the furlough pay and the normal wage level, but this was not required.

In the first three months, around one in three (32%) of eligible jobs were placed on furlough - just under a quarter of a million posts (249,600). As can be seen in Figure 2.1 below, as the restrictions eased in summer 2020, the proportion of eligible jobs furloughed fell dramatically to 7% (around 65,000 posts), and increased again as restrictions increased. Provisional data for 31 May 2021 shows the lowest figure to date of 58,600.

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*NISRA (March 2021), *Northern Ireland Quarterly Index of Services: Quarter 4 (October-December 2020),* (Belfast: NISRA). Output estimates are calculated from the IOS aspect of the Quarterly Business Survey (QBS). The IOS has a sample size of approximately 3,500 businesses, covering all private service sector businesses with 100 or more employees and a representative sample of smaller businesses. The latest quarterly estimates are compared to revised estimates for previous periods.*
The fact that, when restrictions had been largely lifted in October, 65,000 ‘employments’ remained furloughed, led to the suggestion that these employees may be vulnerable to being made redundant when the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends in September 2021. However, Magill and McPeake of the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, in their March 2021 analysis of Labour Market Statistics, took a more optimistic position, arguing that it is likely that the number remaining furloughed in October was falsely elevated and that ‘the number of people at risk of unemployment once the CJRS support is removed is likely to be considerably less than the 65K low point in the series’. The lower figure for May 2021 would appear to support this position.

Source: HMRC (1 July 2021), Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics.7

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7 Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: 1 July 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
As Figure 2.2 above demonstrates, young people aged under 25 were significantly more likely to be furloughed than employees of other ages. Forty percent of employed young women and 30% of young men under 18 were furloughed, compared to around 15% of other age groups. Young people aged 18 to 25 were also significantly more likely to be furloughed than older workers.

In addition to this, a Self-Employed Income Support Scheme was rolled out from June 2020 for self-employed people, providing a cash grant of 80% of their average monthly income up to a maximum of £2,500, paid out in a single instalment covering three months’ worth of profits. As Figure 2.3 demonstrates, four in five of eligible self-employed people applied for the first grant by July 2020, a total of 78,000 people. These figures subsequently fell over the next three grants to a low of 56,000 by May 2021. The fifth grant will close on 30 September 2021, and at time of publication, no further waves of these grants were announced. These statistics highlight how self-employed people have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I believe that the government needs to care for vulnerable children and young people in our society not just while schools are closed, but in the future post pandemic recovery. This includes addressing child abuse, child poverty and negative impact that has on a child’s education, as well as continuity of free school meals. I also believe that the pandemic has exposed a wider mental health crisis in society that while not specific to just young people, it has affected them markedly due to the social isolation at a time of development and growth.”

Young person, YLTS

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9 Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: February 2021 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
10 The exception was the fourth grant, which covered four months worth of profits.
Unemployment and Economic inactivity

The ONS and NISRA labour market statistics published in March 2021 relating to the three month period ending in January 2021 indicated that total employment had fallen by 32,500 over the previous 12 months, the lowest employment rate of any UK region. Young people aged 16-25 account for an incredible 27,000 of these employment losses, equating to a decrease in employment of 24% for this age group over the year.

Magill and McPeake highlight the disproportionate impact on young people:

‘The young have been squeezed on two fronts. Firstly, job losses in sectors which have a relatively youthful workforce and a lack of opportunities for new entrants such as education leavers.’

Recognising this, in July 2020 the Chancellor for the Exchequer announced £2 Billion for a new youth employment scheme in Britain called ‘Kickstart’, aiming to help young people get jobs and experience; this went live in September 2020. Despite being allocated Barnett consequentials for this programme, the equivalent Northern Ireland programme was significantly delayed. However, on 1 April 2021, the Finance Minister announced £20 million allocated to the new Jobstart programme (equivalent to the Kickstart programme) which was launched the following week. Given the devastating impact of COVID-19 on young people’s employment, it is very disappointing that the launch of this programme was delayed more than six months compared to the programme in GB.

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12 This analysis is contained in Magill and McPeake, (March 2021) Op Cit. While NI also had the lowest employment rate of any UK region prior to the pandemic, it has also experienced the second largest decrease in the employment rate of any region.
13 Ibid
14 Ibid paragraph 57.
Claimant Count
The Claimant Count consists of claimants of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) and some Universal Credit (UC) Claimants - those who are required to search for work, i.e., within the ‘Searching for Work’ conditionality regime. In May, the NI claimant count stood at 54,300, equivalent to 5.5% of the NI workforce. Similar to UC applications, there had been a sudden increase in the claimant count in March 2020, although this did not peak until May 2020. See Figure 2.4 below.

As Magill and McPeake point out, the Claimant Count figures include two groups of people who would not normally be counted as unemployed:

1. People employed but on low incomes, and assigned to the ‘searching for work’ conditionality group; and
2. Furloughed workers, as the reduction of pay to 80% of usual earnings will have moved some low-paid workers into eligibility for support under UC.

Universal credit and benefit uptake
UC had been phased in across Northern Ireland over 2017-18. In February 2020 there were 65,200 UC claimants, and typically around 6,000 new claims per month over the previous 18 months. However, in March 2020, as the lockdown was suddenly introduced, there was a dramatic rise in the number of UC claimants, with 35,430.

Figure 2.4: Northern Ireland Claimant Count (seasonally adjusted) in thousands of claimants

Source: NISRA (June 21), NI Claimant Count Tables (Belfast: NISRA). May 2021 figures are provisional and may be revised.

15 NISRA (June 21), NI Claimant Count Tables (Belfast: NISRA). May 2021 figures are provisional and may be revised.
16 Op Cit, Magill and McPeake, paragraph 13.
17 DfC/NISRA, (May 2021), Universal Credit Northern Ireland: data to February 2020, (Belfast, DfC). A slightly lower figure was quoted in DfC documents subsequently, however this figure is being used as it has been disaggregated by conditionality.
new claimants over that month.\textsuperscript{18} While new claimants remained high for the next two months, the new claimant numbers then subsided to a similar pattern as prior to the pandemic. It is to be noted that, in the face of doubling caseloads, and challenges to DfC of maintaining staffing capacity under lockdown, ‘payment timeliness’ remained consistently at 96\%.\textsuperscript{19}

As indicated below in Figure 2.5, in February 2021, there were a total of 135,710 UC claimants, twice the number from the previous year (65,150).\textsuperscript{20} A total of 36,760 were working, compared to 14,430 twelve months earlier, on a low enough income to be eligible.\textsuperscript{21} It is likely many of the new ‘working’ claimants may have been furloughed staff on 80\% of their normal incomes. Of the 135,710 claimants, 30\% (31,740) were lone parents with children, and 4\% (4,050) were couples with children.\textsuperscript{22}

In April 2020, as part of the Chancellor’s early economic response to the pandemic, he announced a £20 weekly top up to the standard UC allowance.\textsuperscript{23} This was due to come to an end in March 2021, but this was extended to the end of September. The UK Government has announced that this payment will not be extended but ‘phased out’ in the Autumn.

\textbf{Figure 2.5: Universal Credit Claimants by conditionality}

![Figure 2.5: Universal Credit Claimants by conditionality](image)

\textit{Source: DfC/NISRA, (May 2021), Northern Ireland Benefits Statistics Summary February 2021}

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\textsuperscript{19} DfC (March 21), Covid-19 Support Achievements, (Belfast, DfC).

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid

\textsuperscript{23} The £20 increase was made available only to those on UC, not those on ‘legacy benefits’ many of whom had disabilities. Also, people seeking asylum, struggling to make their asylum support payments of £39.63 per week stretch to cover their living costs did not receive this additional payment, but instead a significantly lower increase of £1.78. Red Cross (2021), The longest year: [https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/emergency-response/the-longest-year-life-under-local-restrictions.pdf](https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/emergency-response/the-longest-year-life-under-local-restrictions.pdf)
This additional payment of £1,040 has been important to families on low incomes, struggling to make ends meet. Arguably this payment was not, in itself, a sufficient ‘fix’ to the benefit system which, following a decade of cuts and changes, has left low income families worse off, even after the additional £20 is taken into account.\(^{24}\)

### Welfare reform mitigations

The Fresh Start Agreement in November 2015 had included a financial package of £585 million over four years to mitigate against ‘Welfare Reform’ social security cuts including the benefit cap and the ‘bedroom tax’. However, this only targeted the cuts that predated the Welfare Reform and Work (NI) Order 2016, and not those introduced by the legislation that particularly affected payments to families with children.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’s cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms over nine years to May 2019, found that households with children have experienced much larger losses as a result of the reforms than those without children. Losses were particularly dramatic for:

- Lone parent households - losing £2,250 pa on average;
- Households with 3 or more children - losing around £2,575 pa on average; and
- Households with at least one disabled child - losing around £2,000 pa on average.

The mitigation package was due to end by 31 March 2020, at which point thousands of low income households would have experienced a sudden ‘cliff edge’ in terms of their social security payments. However, with the return of the Assembly in January 2020, the New Decade New Approach document included a commitment to ‘extend existing welfare mitigation measures beyond March 2020’.\(^{25}\)

The Minister for Communities stated her determination to meet this commitment and on 3 February announced that she would extend the Social Sector Size criteria (Bedroom Tax) mitigation, introducing

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24 Save the Children (March 2021), \textit{Ten Years Too Long: A decade of child poverty in Northern Ireland}, (Belfast: Save the Children).

legislation through accelerated passage to continue it after March 2020.

The Minister also stated her intention to extend other elements of the mitigation package through introduction of statutory regulations but the unexpected and sudden COVID-19 emergency led to a delay in the legislative processes. While the 2020 Budget Act allowed DfC to continue to make payments to people who would have otherwise been entitled to a Welfare Supplementary Payment as set out in the previous scheme, this has not yet been extended to include payments to mitigate the devastating cuts targeted at families with children.

The DfC Equality Impact Assessment conducted in January 2021 on its draft allocation in Budget 2021-22, indicated that the Department had not been provided funding to extend the mitigation package, including the elements aimed at offsetting the ‘Two child limit’.

Meeting the basic needs of children

As the data above indicates, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic response to the economy, jobs and family incomes, has been enormous across Northern Ireland, although not uniform. While experiencing upheaval in their daily lives, some families have been largely stable financially, while others have been plunged into poverty. This section explores how drops in family income have affected children, and outlines the actions taken by government to ensure their basic needs are met.

Homelessness

Given the direction from government to ‘Stay at Home’ and limit contact with others outside people’s households during the pandemic, there was recognition of the importance of preventing homelessness, particularly where this was due to mortgage or rent default. As a result, on 17 March 2020, the Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced mortgage payment holidays for people whose income was affected by COVID-19, originally for 3 months, but then extended by a further 3 months. Homeowners and landlords could apply for these until 31 March 2021; these were intended to ease the financial pressures on households whose income had been impacted by COVID-19. A ban was also placed on home repossessions until 1 April 2021 and on resulting evictions until after 31 May 2021.

In line with UK emergency legislation, an Act was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) (Northern Ireland) Act 2020, to protect private tenants from eviction by requiring at least 12 weeks’ notice to quit a rented property. These actions have, no doubt, prevented numerous households with children from being made homeless, and it remains to be seen whether there will be a surge in repossession and evictions since the measures ended in June 2021.

Families with children

Between July and December 2020, 4,849 households presented as homeless, one third (34%) of which were families containing a total of 3,136 children. Despite a general decrease in the number of homeless presenters, there was an increase in the numbers requiring temporary accommodation placements. On 4 January 2021, a total of 3,315 children were living in temporary accommodation, an increase of 11% from January 2020. The majority of these children (86%) were living in private single lets and the remaining children were living in voluntary

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28 Ibid
sector hostels (7%), NIHE hostels (6%) or in Hotels/B&Bs (1%).

Young people

The NI Housing Executive’s ‘Reset’ plan, ‘The Way Home; Homelessness responses to COVID-19’ published in November 2020, highlighted that while the number of households presenting as homeless had dropped when compared with the previous year, this was not the case for young people aged 16-25, where there had been an increase from 1,419 to 1,544. The increase was slightly higher for young men than young women.

As Table 2.1 below indicates, the increase in the number of young people requiring temporary accommodation placements was even more stark, an increase of 91% for 16 and 17 year olds, and an increase of 176% for 18-25 year olds.

The NIHE report noted that:

‘The data suggests that young people have been significantly impacted by COVID-19 from a homelessness perspective. Young people have different experiences of, and ways into homelessness than adults. They are frequently in ‘hidden’ homeless situations – staying with family, friends or other shared living arrangements – and lockdown measures, alongside loss of income, have seen many of these arrangements break down. Family tensions – always a key driver of youth homelessness – have also been exacerbated.

We expect that these impacts on young people will continue and be potentially further compounded as some of the measures such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough scheme) and protection for private renters (Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) (Northern Ireland) Act 2020) are removed or reduced. Now and in the longer-term, the Reset Plan will prioritise youth-specific responses to address the major repercussions of COVID-19 on young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.’

In May 2021, the Minister for Communities, announced that the NIHE COVID-19 Reset Plan on Homelessness would be fully funded, and provided a further £9 million investment to bring the full homeless budget for 2021-’22 to £46 million.

Table 2.1: Young people requiring temporary accommodation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>16-17 year olds</th>
<th>18-25 year olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June to December 2019</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June to December 2020</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage increase</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>115%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


29 Ibid
31 Ibid
Support with accessing food and paying for utilities

One of the first issues of concern identified as Northern Ireland went into lockdown was access to food and paying additional costs, particularly for low-income households. As the QUB research found, some groups of young people were more vulnerable than others, for example young care leavers struggled to access essential household items including food, toiletries and cleaning supplies, as well as paying for utility services, such as electricity and home heating.

Food parcels

Within two days of lockdown, on 20 March, the DfC had established an ‘Emergency Leadership’ group to enable it to work in partnership with the Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) to identify problems and then shape the responses, for example in relation to accessing food. Food boxes were provided as an emergency response on demand, in recognition that problems accessing food were not only due to poverty, but also for people who were shielding, or single parents who were not allowed to take their children into shops with them, due to the restrictions that were in place. While there were some challenges, in general the partnership between statutory (central and local government) and voluntary sector organisations was felt to be very successful, in relation to being able to use the resources provided by the statutory agencies, and the CVS organisations being able to react quickly and creatively in finding ways of meeting the needs of individuals and families.33

Over the first three weeks of the DfC Food Parcel service, 30,975 food boxes were provided to vulnerable individuals and families via 24 Council distribution centres.34 A total of 204,006 food parcels were provided by DfC between April and July 2020.35 In addition to this there was a huge response, both by established food banks and other food poverty groups, as well as new grassroots responses, to provide food to those who were struggling to access it, whether for financial or other reasons.

The Trussell Trust reported providing 78,827 food parcels in Northern Ireland from April 2020 to March 2021, of which 31,028 were to households including children.36 This was an increase in 75% from the previous year, the largest increase of any UK region, other than London. The Trussell Trust reported that ‘children, and households with children, have been more likely to need to turn to food banks during the crisis. When looking at the number of parcels distributed, children are overrepresented among those receiving a food parcel.’37

Direct payments in lieu of Free School Meals (FSMs)

In addition to the food parcels provided to low-income households, on 26 March 2020 the Education Minister and Communities Minister announced the introduction of direct payments to families whose children would usually benefit from a school meal. Around 100,000 families received £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools were closed - paid directly into their bank accounts.

34 Update: Covid 19 Food Parcel Service | Department for Communities (communities-ni.gov.uk)
35 Letter from DfC to Mr Gerry Quinn, 7 May 2021, Food bank and food parcel statistics for NI - cais Rhyddid Gwybodaeth i Department for Communities (Northern Ireland) - WhatDoTheyKnow.
37 Ibid p3
on a fortnightly basis. Applications were not necessary for this payment, as the Education Authority provided bank details to DfC. This was originally intended to cover only the normal school term up to 30 June, during the first lockdown, but the Executive subsequently agreed to continue the payments over the school summer holidays, and Halloween half term break. In November 2020, the Education Minister stated that these payments would continue during all school holidays up to Easter 2022, and these payments were also continued during the second lockdown in Winter/Spring 2021.

While direct payments in lieu of FSMs were also made across the UK, the Northern Ireland Executive led the way by the speed in which they took this forward under the first lockdown, then extending it to include school holidays, and into the future.

Support with essential utilities

After food, an additional fundamental challenge for many families and young people on low incomes through the pandemic, was paying for essential utilities as many bills were higher during lockdown. Keeping homes warm was a particular challenge, particularly for children and families who were home-schooling. While families with children were not eligible for the £44 million COVID-19 Heating Payment scheme unless there was an elderly or disabled family member, in December 2020, DfC launched the £3 million ‘Warm, Well and Connected’ programme. This largely addressed wellbeing but also provided some financial support during the winter months for heating homes. The pre-existing Discretionary Support Scheme was also adapted to provide grants and/or loans to claimants facing emergency hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support for Wi-Fi connectivity and devices for schoolwork

During both lockdowns children and young people needed to have access to digital devices and adequate wi-fi to engage with their education. However, for many families on low incomes or with a large number of children needing to share devices, this was extremely problematic. This is addressed more fully in Chapter 4: Education.

Groups of children particularly impacted by economic hardship

Low-income families

Those already in poverty are more likely to have been pushed further into poverty. When asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘My family is financially worse off because of Coronavirus, one in five YLTS respondents agreed (22%), and three in ten disagreed (31%).

Similarly, around one in five children in P7 responding to the same question in the KLTS agreed that their family was financially worse off because of COVID-19. Children from ‘low affluence’ families were more likely to agree (27%) than those from ‘medium affluence’ (20%) or ‘high affluence’ families (14%).

Magill and McPeake warned that ‘an uneven distribution of the negative consequences of the pandemic carry a risk of existing special inequalities and gaps

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38 Free School Meals Payment Scheme: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/free-school-meals-payment-scheme

39 In addition, many households on low incomes were using credit meters, normally buying credit in person in local shops. As lockdown prevented this, energy companies provided different methods of authorising payments, including by phone and online, and agreed to suspend the cutting off of payment meters. Oil providers were also categorized as key workers to maintain the supply of home heating oil during lockdown.
in the standard of living becoming further entrenched, or widening.’  

The uneven socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen in the change in employment by qualification level: ‘All categories of qualification below an undergraduate degree qualification have experienced a fall in employment. Conversely, there has been an increase in employment amongst people with undergraduate degrees and postgraduate qualifications.’  

Children with disabilities or long-term health conditions

The Family Fund has monitored in detail the impact of COVID-19 on families with children with disabilities or long-term health conditions across the UK, through five waves of surveys. This provides a rich source of information on how these families have fared financially over this period.

When asked ‘how has your total household income changed since the Coronavirus outbreak, around half (47%) families surveyed in Northern Ireland said that it had decreased, and a further half (50%) said that it had remained the same.’ Only 3% said that it had increased. The most frequent causes for decreases in household income were due to family members stopping working (25%), being put on furlough (21%), working fewer hours (17%), income from self-employment decreasing (17%) and benefits being reduced (19%). The amount by which incomes had decreased varied considerably, with a median decrease of £151 to £175.  

To add to their financial problems, four in five households surveyed (80%) said that their costs had increased, the items most frequently costing more being food (99%), energy (94%), hygiene products (75%), school and stationary supplies (56%) and toiletries (53%). Only one in ten households (10%) were experiencing no difficulties keeping up with bills and/or credit commitments. Seventy-five percent identified themselves as ‘struggling’ and 15% as ‘falling behind’. The survey responses paint a bleak picture of families using up savings and having to increase their debt to make ends meet.

Parents were also asked about changes to the formal and informal support provided to their children. Seventy-three percent said that the formal support had decreased and 78% reported that informal support had decreased. Problems with direct payments, provided to families to help to cover the costs of care for their children, were raised with the QUB researchers. They noted that ‘as many families were unable to bring in personal assistants due to lockdown restrictions and were therefore unable to use the direct payments within a specified period of time, the benefit monies were subsequently being recalled.’ While the Department of Health stated that there should be flexibility allowed in how the money could be spent, for example, purchasing an iPad for schoolwork, in the absence of being able to bring in a personal assistant, or being able to save up the money to pay for respite care when that was allowed. However, there were delays

41 Ibid para 36.
42 The data in this section is taken from Wave 5 of the survey, with a baseline of 110 families living in Northern Ireland. This is reflective of the data collected over the five waves, with relatively minor variations over time. Family Fund (March 2021), The impact of COVID-19 - A year in the life of families raising disabled and seriously ill young children, Northern Ireland Findings, (London, Family Fund).
43 Ibid
44 Ibid
in providing guidance on this, and there was inconsistency in how much flexibility Trusts allowed.\textsuperscript{46}

**Conclusion**

At times, during the COVID-19 pandemic, debates have focussed on the importance of protecting lives at the cost of livelihoods or vice versa. This was always a false dichotomy as the two are inherently linked. In addition to considering the measures needed to protect people’s health from COVID-19, the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive have recognised the importance of preventing unemployment, maintaining incomes, and ensuring access to shelter, food and other basic necessities.

In this chapter we have reported on Government programmes to support household incomes and prevent unemployment, the patterns of uptake of these programmes and the numbers claiming universal credit, both employed or unemployed. In the absence of recent child poverty figures, it is not always easy to see the children in these statistics. This lack of visibility has, we would argue, made it easy in the past to target ‘welfare reform’ cuts at children. However, behind these statistics are parents on low incomes struggling to afford basic necessities for their children. The additional costs of food, technology, educational items required through lockdown, coupled with furloughed wages, unemployment or the threat of unemployment, restrictions on childcare, have placed families under a great deal of pressure through the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is not clear at the moment how many of those furloughed or self-employed receiving grants through the SEISS will be out of work as these schemes come to an end, and the impact of this on the number of children living in poverty.

Indeed, as things stand as this report goes to print, all of the financial support schemes are due to end in September: the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employed Income Support scheme, the £20 weekly Universal Credit top-up are all due to be discontinued at the end of September. There is a risk that many families will start to face severe poverty around this time.

What is clear is that, while few can have escaped the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how we live our lives, it has not been experienced evenly across all households. For some households the pandemic has had little effect on their financial situation while others have experienced significant hardship and difficulties making ends meet. Without a determined effort by the Northern Ireland Executive to support those who have fallen into poverty, or indeed into deeper poverty, there is a danger that pre-existing inequalities will widen and become further entrenched.

As the Northern Ireland Executive looks to drive the COVID-19 recovery forward, it must ensure a focus on the most disadvantaged, including families with children and young people.

“We were all worried in case any of us got infected as my mum relied upon self-employed work at home as a childminder. This meant she would be out of business if any of us had to isolate or if we had the coronavirus. It would also mean my dad could take it into his work as a public servant.”

Young person, YLTS
Recommendations

2.1 The NI Executive’s Coronavirus Recovery Plan must prioritise rebuilding the economy with a focus on those who have been hardest hit, including unemployed young people and families in low-income work. The new Jobstart youth employment programme should be monitored and adapted as it is rolled out to ensure that it is providing the maximum benefit to young unemployed, or underemployed people.

2.2 The £20 additional weekly payment should be maintained on a permanent basis. At the same time the UK social security system should be transformed so that, once again, it becomes an effective ‘safety net’ for all in society. Benefits must be sufficient to provide an adequate standard of living to all recipients. A Minimum Income Guarantee should be provided, with the goal of ensuring that this is set at a level so that no children are living below the poverty line.

2.3 Until the social security system is transformed, the Northern Ireland Executive should extend the mitigations package to include elements to address child poverty and provide support for low income families, including continuing the mitigations relating to the social sector size criteria, the benefit cap, the payment for children transferring from DLA to PIP and the following new elements:

- mitigation payments for families affected by the two-child limit and removal of the family elements of tax credits;
- grants to address costs associated with employment;
- a per-child payment for low income families; and
- an expanded payment for low income families with young children.

2.4 The NI Executive should develop an ambitious Anti-Poverty Strategy, which should have a vision of eradicating child poverty, provide specific commitments on how it will progressively reduce child poverty over time, and a fully resourced delivery plan.

2.5 Eligibility for Free School Meals should be reviewed to ensure all children in poverty are included. Direct payments in lieu of FSMs should continue to be provided over school holidays on a permanent basis.
3. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
Background
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) takes a holistic approach to health, in that the underlying determinants of health are recognised, and rights relate to the whole continuum of health from prevention and health promotion to intervention and rehabilitation (UN 2013, at para. 2). Article 24 of the UNCRC is particularly relevant in the context of health, it states that ‘all children and young people have the right to the best attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health.’

During the most recent examination of the UK and NI as a devolved administration on its implementation of the UNCRC, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (‘Committee’) made a range of concluding observations in relation to health and health services, physical disabilities, and mental health.

The Committee statement to State Parties on measures they should consider in response to the public health emergency made two main recommendations which related to health and the provision of basic services for children including nutritious food, water, healthcare, sanitation, and birth registration (Rec 4 & 5). The Committee emphasised that ‘children should not be denied access to healthcare, including assessment and screening, testing and vaccinations, mental health services, and treatment for pre-existing conditions due to increasing pressure on healthcare systems and the scarcity of resources. The statement also highlighted the need for State Parties to ‘protect children whose vulnerability is further increased by the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic’ (Rec 9). These points were reflected further in other UN guidance documents published during the pandemic where State Parties were advised to ‘minimise restrictions on child-centred services, particularly those for the most vulnerable children,’ and to ensure the national response to COVID-19 ‘contains specific actions for children’s mental health.’

This section of the report considers the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people’s health and their access to health services, with a particular focus on those deemed most vulnerable to its impact i.e. infants and young children, children with pre-existing conditions, disabilities, children form disadvantaged communities and migrant groups. Government policy in relation to delivery of health services during the pandemic is discussed, along with recommendations on what Government needs to do to support those affected by the pandemic in the immediate and longer term.

Introduction
Before the pandemic, demand for child health services outstripped capacity and waiting lists were a growing problem which affected children and young people’s access to high quality care. During the pandemic, many statutory services scaled back their services, prioritising ‘emergency’, ‘urgent’ or ‘essential’ services. Due to this scaling back existing health waiting time problems and health inequalities in Northern Ireland have

1 OHCHR | Convention on the Rights of the Child
2 Section B: Overview of the relevant articles of the UNCRC, General Comments and the Committee’s Concluding Observations 2016 Children and Young People’s Strategy (niccy.org), (para 56, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66)
3 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) Statement on Impacts of COVID Pandemic on Children and Young People. Treaty bodies Download (ohchr.org)
4 Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf (un.org)
5 UN Policy Brief: Covid-19 and the need for action on mental health (May 2020)
been exacerbated. NICCY is currently undertaking a review of health waiting lists for under 18’s and will report on its findings in September 2021, however it is clear that during the pandemic there has been an increase in the number and length of time children and young people are waiting for healthcare across a range of acute and community-based services.

There has been a marked reduction in the availability of primary health care such as dental and ophthalmic services throughout the pandemic, with access restricted to emergency care only. There are concerns about the backlog created and the impact that delays or missed appointments will have on oral health and health screening. Northern Ireland already has very poor oral health outcomes for children, with 40% of 5-year-olds showing signs of decay, compared to 25% in England. New research from YLTS reported that 27% of 16-year-olds could not get medical treatment during the pandemic for a health issue not related to Coronavirus (e.g. from doctor, dentist, counsellor etc.).

One young person spoken to as part of the focus groups reflected on the difficulty of getting health treatment and how their condition had worsened:

“So like I had a sore tooth for a couple of weeks, didn’t I? And they couldn’t do a thing with it. So all they could do is give me paracetamol and they weren’t able to arrange a visit to the dentist. But there has been times, some with my physical health like I need to see a doctor and I was just rushed in an ambulance because it needed to be done…” (F6)

The QUB report on the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people found evidence that ‘stopping vital public health and wellbeing services, that ensure children’s right to survive and thrive, impacted greatly on children, especially those considered clinically vulnerable.’

The report also reflected on tensions between professional groups within the healthcare system regarding the evidence base for decisions made to close or restrict access to facilities and services that impacted on children and young people, this includes some health screening programmes and respite services for children with disabilities and complex needs.

Several reports have been critical of the disproportionate blanket application of health-related policy or guidance during the pandemic, referring to a lack of assessment of its implications for children as a group and a lack of service specific risk assessment and person-centred care around matters such as when and how services should close or reopen, and the implementation of policy around hospital visitations.
NICCY's legal team supported a sixteen year-old being treated as an inpatient in a mental health facility in March 2020. She was an in-patient during a period of ‘lockdown’ and the unit advised that direct visits from her immediate family could no longer take place. After a review of Covid related regulations and practice applied in other medical settings, NICCY made representations to the psychiatric unit noting that their policy made less allowance for visits than comparable settings. As a result the visitation policy at the unit was changed to allow direct contact.

Adolescent Mental Health

Mental health has been one of the most discussed impacts of the pandemic and particularly so in relation to children and young people. There is a growing body of international research which has documented the negative affect COVID-19 and the associated restrictions have had on children’s emotional wellbeing and mental health.

 Whilst a significant proportion of children and young people will have maintained good emotional wellbeing and mental health during the pandemic, and a small number may even have experienced improved mental health, a significant number will have experienced a deterioration. Research conducted in Northern Ireland through the YLTS and KLTS reported that 41% of Primary 7 respondents and 52% of 16-year-olds felt their mental and emotional health had worsened during the pandemic (Figure 3.1 below). This is against pre-pandemic prevalence data for Northern Ireland which estimates that 1 in 8 children and young people have an emotional disorder such as anxiety or depression, and that rates of common mental health problems are 25% higher than in other parts of the UK.

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<th>YLTS (%)</th>
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<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better during Lockdown</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same as Before</td>
<td>46</td>
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Source: KLTS & YLTS

The long-term impact of the pandemic on children and young people’s mental health has the potential to be significant, especially if appropriate support and intervention is not provided, and requires ongoing monitoring.

“My mental health had worsened and my physical appearance had changed, so I was mostly concerned about others perceiving me in negative ways after not seeing them for over 6 months.” (YLTS Survey response)

Many children and young people will have experienced the loss of a family member or someone else important to them during the pandemic. Children and young people’s involvement in visiting loved ones in hospital and attending funerals has also been restricted throughout the pandemic. These

17 KLTS & YLTS
18 www.hscboard.hscni.net/download/PUBLICATIONS/MENTAL_HEALTH_AND_LEARNING_DISABILITY/youth-wellbeing/Youth-Wellbeing.pdf
19 Emerging Minds Conference; Emerging Evidence: Coronavirus and children and young people’s mental health. Issue 8. (annafreud.org)
circumstances may increase the likelihood of a traumatic bereavement.\(^\text{20}\).

One young person NICCY engaged with as part of the focus groups had lost their mum during the pandemic and had problems with trying to access bereavement support.

“Yes [I’ve sought support for bereavement], but there is a waiting list and my guess is, that it’s as long as the Amazon river. So, (…) it was six months ago, around six months ago I lost my mum. So, I’ve had six months to comprehend what happened to mum, and it has sort of I guess you could say, got to the point where I don’t think I’ll even need it, particularly bereavement counselling or anything, or any support, if you know what I mean, like at all.” (F5)

Young people with co-existing mental health and substance misuse problems faced significant challenges with a lack of integration and long waiting times for services before the pandemic and these challenges continue. The Mindwise Linked-In Project works with young people leaving police custody and who have a range of complex needs. Face to face contact is important for these young people to maintain a routine and to fully engage with support services. As one youth worker said, “they can still get access to drink and drugs but they’re not getting the support to keep safe and reduce harm”. (W2)

Mindwise project staff reinstated their face-to-face meetings with clients as soon as they felt it was safe to do so, and in line with health guidance. However, young people were impacted by isolation during the periods of restriction. This quote from a young person illustrates this point of view, “I have been able to see x and my social worker face to face however my mental health appointments are over the phone which I don’t enjoy as I don’t like talking on the phone.” (W2)

General Practice activity has been severely affected during the pandemic. A knock-on effect has been a fall in referrals to secondary care services, such as CAMHS. A significant increase in referrals to CAMHS has been predicted post lockdown, the full impact of which is yet to be seen by services, however, young people are presenting to statutory services with much more complex mental ill health,\(^\text{21}\) including those with pre-existing mental health problems whose condition has been made worse by the pandemic.\(^\text{22}\)

The Coronavirus Act (2020) introduced temporary changes to the Mental Health Order (Northern Ireland) 1986.\(^\text{23}\) These changes mean that young people being treated for mental health problems are at risk of being detained for longer than necessary, and that people who are in need of treatment may have to wait longer to receive timely assessments.\(^\text{24}\) While we accept that emergency provisions have been unavoidable at points during the pandemic, it is of the utmost importance that these modifications are closely monitored and steps taken to meet the conditions for their withdrawal as quickly as possible. Throughout the pandemic NICCY monitored the application of these temporary arrangements for children for their unintended negative consequences.

The Department of Health published a COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan on 19th May 2020 in recognition of the wide

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\(^{20}\) [Leading experts appeal for an understanding of childhood traumatic bereavement during and beyond the pandemic (annafreud.org)]

\(^{21}\) [HSC BOARD PERFORMANCE REPORT – 2014/15 (Month 12 – March 2015) (hscni.net)]

\(^{22}\) [Coronavirus Report: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs (youngminds.org.uk)]

\(^{23}\) [doh-amhu-01-2021.pdf (health-ni.gov.uk)]

\(^{24}\) [Coronavirus Act - Temporary Changes to the Mental He... (mindwisenv.org)]
scale and profound impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the population. There was an understanding that steps would need to be taken to prepare for an increase in demand for services. There was also recognition that very significant capacity challenges were faced by mental health services before the onset of COVID-19. A specific subgroup was established to focus on the ‘mental health needs of children and young people during and after the pandemic, to support recovery and to quickly raise any issues with the Department for resolution.’ NICCY monitored the specific actions related to children and young people through this subgroup and in periodic meetings with the HSCB and Department of Health, updates were sought around specific steps being taken by Government to meet increasing demand and the predicted ‘surge’ in referrals. A considerable amount of data collection and analysis has been produced by this group regarding impact and lived experiences of children and families, regrettably there is little evidence to date of significant tangible actions being taken to address the immediate issues identified. The publication of the Mental Health Strategy in June 2021 and work to update and engage children and young people on the Still Waiting Action Plan are positive steps to improve the system in the longer term if resources are made available.

**Early Years Services**

The risk of increased emotional or behavioural problems in younger children due to the pandemic is a concern. The early years period which describes the 0-3 years age group is a critical point when bonding and attachment with primary care givers is vital to good infant mental health. The pandemic has led to increased stress for many families which can have a direct impact on the emotional regulation of children. Family Support Hubs which signpost families and children to early intervention support have reported a considerable increase in demand for financial / material support from families during the pandemic, alongside the consistently high demand for parenting programmes and support for emotional and behavioural issues for children. The correlation between early years support and improved life chances and positive future health outcomes is well established. Many Early Years services, such as Sure Start, targets its support to children and carers living in the most deprived communities, these are the same communities that have been disproportionately affected by restrictions caused by the pandemic. During normal times these projects deliver a variety of health, family support and early education services which are designed to support children’s learning skills, health and well-being, and social and emotional development. During the pandemic much of their direct face to face work had to stop, some programmes moved online, such as rhythm and rhyme and breast-feeding support and where possible some ‘garden gate visits’ were used to stay connected with families and provide support. Face to face engagement only started to resume as of 25 March 2021 with child only sessions, with parent and toddler

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27 Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk); Interdepartmental Action Plan in response to the “Still Waiting” Report | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)
28 Maternal mental health during a pandemic | Centre for Mental Health
29 PowerPoint Presentation (hsni.net) (April-Dec 2020)
31 ‘Sure Start’ keeps families busy at home during pandemic - HSCB (hsni.net)
32 Weir welcomes reopening of Sure Start and youth services | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)
sessions permitted to restart from 24 May 2021.\textsuperscript{33}

Health Visitors also have a critical role in the early years health and development of children, for a significant part of the pandemic these staff were relocated to provide COVID-19 related care and services resulting in a reduction in the number of health assessments and home visits which can identify support needs.\textsuperscript{34} Loss of health visiting appointments, in addition to restrictions in access to other early years services removed an important support system for parents, particularly first-time mothers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is likely to be a range of consequences relating to this and there is anecdotal evidence of an increase in presentations to the health system around feeding problems for new-borns and research which is showing that the loss of socialisation of young children during lockdown has impacted on speech and language development.\textsuperscript{35}

Birth registration is necessary to access some types of child benefits, including milk vouchers, any delay in access to essential benefits is of concern. NICCY is aware that at the beginning of the first lockdown many public services had to adjust to non-face to face contact with the public, however NICCY has not seen any evidence that birth registration and access to benefits was affected other than immediately following the first lockdown.

Migrant children, including refugee and asylum-seeking children and unaccompanied minors generally face challenges with obtaining paperwork and registering with healthcare providers and this was made more difficult during the pandemic.\textsuperscript{36} These challenges were confirmed during the focus groups with individuals from the BME, Roma and Traveller communities. We were told that several young women (16-17 yrs old) from the traveller community became parents during the pandemic but had limited access to pre-natal and infant care after birth. We also heard that Roma families who were newcomers just before or during lockdown had significant problems registering with GPs, which meant that emergency medical care could only be accessed if paid for.

There needs to be concerted system-wide efforts and prioritisation of support for families and children, and the Voluntary and Community Sector should be at the centre of this. The closure of early years services has had a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the communities and families they support. The removal of face-to-face contact has been particularly hard for those services that work with the most vulnerable or marginalised.

**Children with Disabilities or Complex Health Needs**

Research is showing the negative impact of the pandemic on disabled or seriously ill children’s physical and mental health.\textsuperscript{37} There is an inextricable link between physical health and mental health and this link is much more pronounced for children and young people with a physical disability. Children with a physical disability are at a much higher risk of developing a mental health condition compared to their non-disabled peers.

\textsuperscript{33} Assembly Written Question-AQW 18939/17-22
\textsuperscript{34} Rebuilding Health and Social Care System: Strategic Framework https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default files/publications/health/rebuilding-hsc.pdf section (para 2.9, p9)
\textsuperscript{35} Education Endowment Foundation.
\textsuperscript{36} Corr et al. (2021), Op. Cit.
\textsuperscript{37} https://www.familyfund.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?idMF=c7e2f959-c183-49e8-bef8-1a7ae8e12e6e
Existing barriers in accessing support and services by children with disabilities or complex health needs have significantly worsened during the pandemic. It has been reported that children with disabilities and pre-existing and life-limiting conditions faced the most disruption to access to health care. Another study reported that approximately 7 in 10 families with disabled children experienced a reduction in both formal and informal support during the pandemic, and that a reinstatement of support has been slow.

Schools have an extensive role in the lives of children and young people with special educational needs or disability because they often provide a range of interventions to meet children’s health and care needs, as well as their learning. Many schools also have specialist resources and equipment that aren’t easily accessible elsewhere, such as therapy pools, sensory rooms, and adapted outdoor play equipment. The loss of specialist support through the closure of schools, along with respite or day services has had a profound impact on this group of children and young people.

For this review, NICCY spoke with groups of young people with heart conditions or cancer diagnosis, some of whom were undergoing health treatment during the pandemic. Much of their experience of COVID-19 was no different to their peers, in that their education was disrupted, and their ability to socialise and enjoy leisure activities was affected. However, some of these young people had already missed out on school and socialising due to their treatment or illness and were finding it difficult to have to extend their period of isolation further due to COVID-19.

Some of the distinct ways that children and young people with health conditions experienced the pandemic are outlined here:

- Some young people found it easier to adapt to restrictions because they were used to isolating and being restricted in the type of things they could do. For others it felt reassuring that everyone was having to do what they were doing, and it became easier to stay in touch as everyone was online.
- Hospital stays have been shorter with more care provided in the community—this is what children and families want long term.
- Online teaching and a more flexible daily routine helped some young people to manage their health condition better and stopped them from having mental and physical burn-out.
- Having the option of telephone consultations was welcomed and for some groups of children tele-medicine was already something they were used to.
- Young people were more anxious about their health because of the fear of catching the virus due to their underlying health condition. Charities have had a very important role in reassuring families and young people and ensuring communication between clinical teams and families were maintained throughout the pandemic.
- For young people ready to transition from paediatric to adult services, the move was happening ‘blind’ without preparation and without time to build up relationships with new staff.
- The loss of face to face groups, including residential with other young people with health conditions was missed by young people. Whilst

39 https://www.familyfund.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?idMF=c7e2f959-c183-49e8-bef8-1a7ae8e12e6e
Children with ongoing and long-term health conditions and their families should have access to all the support they need to ensure their child has the best attainable standard of health and wellbeing. The NI Executive must ensure that clear regional wide policies are in place to govern the prioritisation of healthcare provision during a pandemic, that all health policies are child rights impact assessed, and that decisions to reduce or withdraw services are proportionate to the challenges posed by the health emergency and remain in place for the shortest time possible.

**Impact of School Closures on Health**

The closure of schools has had a wide-ranging impact on children and young people that extends far beyond educational attainment. Schools are often the place in which early signs of health or developmental problems are identified and are a main referral route to many health services. Schools were restricted in their ability to carry out this important role whilst they were closed, and pupils were not physically attending.

In addition to being a referral route through to the health system, schools are also a hub for the delivery of health-related services such as educational psychology, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and engagement with CAMHS. When schools closed the main channel families and children had with allied health professionals also closed. There are examples of health professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists attempting to maintain support for children by linking in with remote schooling platforms, however, this appears to be down to the motivation of individual practitioners and schools, rather than a regional approach. The establishment of a system wide process to support Allied Health Professionals to maintain links with children during school closures could have been of great benefit. The independent counselling service for school (ICSS) which runs within post primary schools remained open during the school closures, although it moved to an online platform. Online drop-in sessions also continued to be provided.

Health check-ups and vaccination programmes normally carried out through schools could not happen when facilities were closed and this disproportionately impacted preschool and primary school age children. Whilst missed appointments were rescheduled in community health centres when schools were closed, going forward it is important that follow-ups are carried out to ensure health checks and vaccinations for all children are up to date.

For school-age children, school is also a hub for the delivery of an extensive range of extra-curricular activities from art, drama, music to a range of physical sports. Some children and young people struggled to find an alternative to these activities during lockdown.

“My physical health has deteriorated as I have gained quite a bit of weight.” All of my social activities have been stopped completely as a result of this pandemic and so I have been stuck at home with my family. However, since my family has wifi I can indulge in many things, namely, gaming.” (W4)

More generally, data from the KLTS and YLTS has shown the negative impact of the lockdown on some children and young people’s physical health. As Figure 3.2 shows approximately 30% of children that responded to the KLTS and YLTS surveys

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40 Feedback from NICCY led discussion groups with young people- Feb- Mar 2021.
reported that the lockdown had worsened their physical health.

**Figure 3.2 Children and Young people’s views of impact of lockdown on physical health**

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Source: KLTS & YLTS

The proportion of time young people were spending online for school-work increased considerably during the pandemic and was in addition to time spent online for social reasons.41 Young people NICCY spoke to talked about finding it difficult to ‘switch off’ or to distinguish between school-work and relaxing because of the amount of time they were spending in their bedroom and online.

“(..)I’ve also found I get frequent headaches whilst doing online schooling and have found it harder to have a regular sleep cycle. Naturally, the mental health of myself and my friends has declined since the pandemic started, and I’ve personally struggled with feelings of depression, anxiety, and paranoia.” (W4)

Alternatively, some young people particularly those with mental or physical health conditions reflected on the positives of online learning / remote schooling.

“If having a bad mental health day, now that lessons are being recorded, it is easier to catch up on work missed. Otherwise, I would have had to find someone that’s in the 4-5 classes per day that I have missed.” (F4)

**Use of Technology to Access Health Services**

Throughout the pandemic most statutory and voluntary and community sector health services moved to online / telephone-based support and advice. It is recognised that telecommunication has an important role in the delivery of a modern health and social care system, and the pandemic has fast tracked the move to a more blended approach to how services are run. The evidence base for such a system is developing and during the pandemic there have been reports that a remote model of service delivery has led to more contact and more positive engagement with some children and parents with support services.42 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services reported to have maintained ‘normal’ routine services during most of the pandemic due to moving to remote forms of contact.43

Whilst telecommunication should have a role in a modern health and social care system, the pandemic has also highlighted the importance of physical face to face contact. The mixed picture of the use of telecommunication for health and wellbeing support by the children and young people NICCY engaged with, reflects the need for a flexible and choice-based approach to its use with patients. The role of telecommunications as part of the health and social care service model requires in-depth evaluation.44 Barriers to digital communication for certain groups must

41 Covid-19: Lockdown measures and children’s screen time - House of Lords Library (parliament.uk)
42 The Impact of COVID-19 on the Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People: Perspectives from the front line, CYPSP 2020
also be given full consideration if we do not wish to worsen existing health inequalities and social exclusion.

**Health Protection for under 18’s-Shielding and Vaccination**

Throughout the pandemic, the evidence has shown that children and young people are at lowest health risk from COVID-19, with highest risk being with the oldest and those with certain underlying health conditions.

Because of this vaccine trials and vaccine administration focused on the oldest in the population first. 45

Before the vaccine was available and circulation of the virus was high, anyone deemed vulnerable to the virus was advised to isolate and informed that they would receive notification from their Doctor or Clinician via a shielding letter. In September 2020, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) raised concerns with NICCY about the robustness of the existing system to ensure that clear, accurate and timely information was being sent out to all clinically vulnerable children and their families. At that time all jurisdictions of the UK, apart from Northern Ireland, had adopted RCPCH shielding guidance that included appropriate accountability for Trusts and medical directors supporting child health professionals. NICCY wrote to the Chief Medical Officer seeking assurances that adequate measures were in place and was informed that guidance had been distributed to all relevant services.46 As of April 2021, the RCPCH concerns remain about whether the system is robust enough to be able to identify children by clinical vulnerability to COVID-19.47

In December 2020, at the beginning of the vaccine roll-out in NI, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization (JCVI) which is the body advising the UK (and devolved) Governments on vaccine roll-out, advised that vaccination of certain groups of clinically extremely vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds was reasonably safe and effective.48

The quote below is from a young person aged 17 years old with a heart condition as they reflect on their experience of the pandemic and how receiving the vaccine reduced their anxiety about catching the virus.

“I found returning to a social setting after shielding was hard as I was very anxious and nervous about seeing people at the risk of possibly catching the virus. However, since I returned to school I was a lot more relaxed and especially now since I have got my two vaccines I am not as anxious or worried.” (W4)

For the first 7-8 months of the vaccination programme roll-out, under 16’s, including those deemed extremely clinically vulnerable had not been offered the vaccine due to a lack of data to determine the risks and benefits, this has often meant very lengthy periods of shielding and ongoing stress and anxiety for children and their families.49

“My little brother has medical issues and they were frightened at how it would affect him if it came into our home. They were worried about us all but his body cannot fight infection. We

45 JCVI Statement on Immunisation Prioritisation - April 2020
47 Meeting between NICCY and RCPCH
48 Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation: advice on priority groups for COVID-19 vaccination (publishing.service.gov.uk)
49 UK government adopts RCPCH guidance on children and shielding | RCPCH
had not been in contact with anyone other than our household and all groceries etc were delivered to garage so they were very nervous.” (YLTS)

NICCY welcomes the recent decision in July 2021 to offer the vaccine to some young people aged 12 yrs old and over if they have an underlying health condition that puts them at higher risk of COVID-19 or if they live with someone who is immunosuppressed. NICCY also welcomed the decision in February 2021 to prioritise one carer of each child with a statement of special educational need for early vaccination. The roll out of the vaccine to teaching staff within special schools was also positive, although NICCY wrote to the Health Minister in February 2021 seeking clarification about the limited number of staff included for vaccination and requesting further details on the evidence base for making this decision.

The Committee statement on COVID-19 in April 2020 urged States to respect the rights of the child when taking measures to tackle the public health threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this included with respect to vaccine testing and accessibility to vaccination.

“...children should not be denied access to health care, including to testing and a potential future vaccine, to COVID-19 related and COVID-19 unrelated medical treatment…”

At the time of writing, the JCVI remains undecided about whether to offer the vaccine to all under 18’s, bar those 3 months from their 18th birthday. A range of different factors are being considered as part of the decision making process, this includes the risk – benefit balance for children and the growing pressure from UN bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO) for countries such as the UK, to share additional surplus vaccine to other countries to protect all adults across the world before vaccinating children.

Whilst the prevailing evidence is that the direct health risk from COVID-19 on most children and young people is low, there is growing concern about the effect of ‘long covid’ for some children, particularly those with a history of infection. Furthermore, as government policy starts to distinguish between vaccinated and unvaccinated people including in relation to the roll out of ‘vaccination certificates’ or ‘vaccination passports’, there is concern that unvaccinated children and young people will be treated differently in relation to access to travel, hospitality / leisure and employment. There is the potential for very serious breaches of children’s rights unless a full and comprehensive assessment of all policy proposals is conducted. NICCY will continue to monitor developments closely and advise Government accordingly.

50 JCVI updates vaccination guidelines | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)
51 NICCY Letter to Health Minister- 3rd March 2021
52 Treaty bodies Download (ohchr.org)
53 JCVI issues advice on COVID-19 vaccination of children and young people - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
54 Episode #42 - Vaccines and children (who.int)
55 COVID-19 Greenbook chapter 14a (publishing.service.gov.uk)
56 Around 5% of children develop long COVID-19 symptoms, suggests new study (news-medical.net)
58 Ibid
Conclusion

The pandemic has affected children and young people’s health and access to health care in many ways. It has significantly widened existing health inequalities and presents the biggest challenge to the NHS since its inception.59 & 60 Whilst one off or covid specific funding is required to address covid specific pressures, sustainable targeted funding is necessary in the longer term to strengthen services and forge ahead with transformation plans to modernise the health and social care system.61

COVID-19 has instigated a necessity to work differently, and during the pandemic there has been many examples of greater holistic multi-agency and multi-sectoral working, sharing of expertise, and outreach to children and young people. This in turn has prompted professionals to reflect on healthcare service delivery and question how it can be more effective moving forward.62 This has been one of the silver linings from this crisis and mirrors what children and young people want health services to look like in a post-covid world.63

As we look towards a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the NI Executive’s decision making must take account of the complex and intersecting nature of the issues facing children, and it is vital that the holistic needs of infants, children and young people are fully considered.

“I’ve been feeling isolated but yet worried about catching the virus – I have been affected negatively it has been hard being stuck in constantly then when I do go to school I have anxiety in case I get the virus, so it is a no-win situation.”

Young person, YLTS

59 Fair Society Healthy Lives (The Marmot Review) - IHE (instituteofhealthequity.org)
61 Health Committee Briefing: 11 March 2021 committee-25663.pdf (niassembly.gov.uk)
Recommendations

3.1 The NI Executive must adopt a cross-departmental mechanism which is committed to taking a ‘child health in all policies’ approach in all decisions at both regional and local levels.

3.2 The Health and Social Care rebuilding plans must be underpinned by the principles of children’s rights and focus on system reform which strengthens their ability to reach all infants, children and young people through universal services and targeted provisions for the most disadvantaged.

3.3 The DoH response to the health waiting list crisis must include specific planning and resourcing to address health waiting lists for under 18’s.

3.4 The NI Executive Covid Recovery Plan should ensure children’s right to health is prioritised and that a comprehensive range of emotional wellbeing and mental health services are in place to meet the immediate needs of parents and carers, infants, children, and young people caused by the pandemic.

3.5 The HSC system should ensure that changes made to child health services in response to COVID-19 are fully evaluated and only retained and mainstreamed where they offer greater flexibility, choice and improved access and quality of care to children and young people.

3.6 In any future public health emergency, the following measures should be taken:

   i. Restrictions to child health services should fully respect the best interests of the child, only be applied where necessary, be proportionate and remain in place for the shortest time possible.

   ii. Where access to allied health related services such as speech and language therapy, educational psychology, and occupational therapy are impacted, alternative ways for children to access support must be provided.

   iii. Public health emergency planning should have a child rights impact assessment process embedded within it to ensure that decisions take account of children’s rights and best interests.

   iv. Health and Social Care Services should have access to a robust Child Health Information system to ensure accurate and timely information is provided to all clinically vulnerable children and their families.
4. EDUCATION
Children and young people have a fundamental right to education; an education that is child-centred, child-friendly and empowering. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines the right to education, whereas Article 29(1), which details the aims of education, adds a qualitative dimension to the general right to education. It reflects the rights and inherent dignity of the child and highlights the need for educational processes to be based upon the principles outlined in Article 29(1). As such, ‘availability’, ‘accessibility’, and ‘adaptability’ are core aspects of the right to education. Educational institutions and programmes should be available in sufficient quantity, and accessible to everyone, especially the most vulnerable groups, without discrimination. Education must also be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings.

In March 2020, the onset of the pandemic and the immediate closure of schools across Northern Ireland bore a very real threat to children’s and young people’s fundamental right to education. In response, the education system engaged a variety of approaches to facilitate learning at home including virtual teaching, the uploading of lessons online, and providing hardcopy learning material for use at home. Nonetheless, the speed with which schools closed meant that it took some time to establish practices that supported children. It also took time for clear guidance to be provided by the Department of Education (DE) and Education Authority (EA), meaning that, during the first lockdown, schools established a range of practices by which they educated children1.

Whilst schools re-opened to all pupils in September 2020, this period faced its own unique challenges as pupils and school staff adjusted to restrictions and measures to curb the spread of transmission. Some schools contended with localised outbreaks, with positive cases and their close contacts being required to isolate at home. Further disruption to education was evident in the form of an extended mid-term break in October 2020. As the rate of transmission and the number of cases increased, the Minister announced on 5th January 2021 that all schools, apart from special schools, were to close to the majority of pupils apart from children of key workers and vulnerable children. This period of closure lasted until 8th March when P1 – P3 pupils returned, followed by pupils in Years 4 – 7 and Years 12 – 14 on the 22nd March, and all other pupils on the 12th April 2021.

Much has been written about the potential long-lasting societal and economic effects of school closures. The UN2 has warned that the potential losses that may accrue in learning for children and young people, and for their development, are hard to fathom. As reflected in a joint statement from the Chief Medical Officers and Deputy Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales3 there is a significant risk of long-term harm to many children and young people from not attending school.

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In its COVID-19 statement, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) urged States to consider the educational, inter alia, impacts of the pandemic on children. While acknowledging that in crisis situations, international human rights law ‘exceptionally permits measures that may restrict the enjoyment of certain human rights in order to protect public health’ such restrictions must be imposed only when necessary, be proportionate and kept to an absolute minimum. The Committee also highlighted that responses to the pandemic, including restrictions and decisions on allocation of resources, should reflect the principle of the best interests of the child.

In NICCY’s opinion, the hasty response to the pandemic required by our education system has meant that the Committee’s calls were not fully heeded at the beginning of lockdown, nor realised in the months that followed. As a result, the impact of school closures and subsequent disruption to education, has been felt acutely by children and young people. We have received several first-hand reports from children and young people of the negative effect of school closures on education and emotional wellbeing, which has been compounded by a continued uncertainty about the duration of school closures and confused, and sometimes contradictory, communications:

“Well, with education it’s been somewhat of a roller coaster. It’s like a seesaw if you like. It’s one minute we’re in school, then we’re in lockdown, so we’re out of school for like, I think it was four or five months. Then we’re back to school for three, four months again, then we’re out of school back in lockdown. Now we’re back in school. It’s confusing. And it’s actually affected my work very, very negatively.” (F5)

Data from the Kids Life and Times (KLTS) and Young Life and Times (YLTS) surveys provides a startling picture of the impact of the pandemic on children. Almost half of P7 children who responded to the KLTS (46%) felt their education had been negatively affected following the first lockdown. Further concerning is that data from the YLTS, captured after the second lockdown in May 2021, revealed that over two thirds (70%) of the 16-year-olds surveyed felt that their education had been negatively affected. It is evident that children and young people have deeply felt the effects of school closures and are greatly concerned about the impact on their education.

Figure 4.1: Children’s and young people’s perceptions of how lockdown affected their education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Overall, I feel my education has been negatively affected by Coronavirus.’</th>
<th>KLTS %</th>
<th>YLTS %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS, YLTS

In this chapter, we reflect on the issues that have impacted on children and young people’s engagement with education throughout the pandemic, particularly during the periods of school closure. We assess the specific impacts of school closures on the education of vulnerable children and young people, and then consider the provisions required to address any inequalities arising.
from the pandemic, ensuring that all children’s and young people’s right to education is fully protected.

**Children’s and young people’s engagement in and experience of remote learning**

Evidence suggests that inconsistency in pupil engagement in, and support for, remote learning are amongst the major contributory factors which have impacted on children’s and young people’s education during school closures.

Throughout the course of the pandemic and subsequent school closures, children and young people described vastly different levels of support and education between different schools as well as between different teachers within the same school. Data from the KLTS (see Figure 4.2 below) reinforced the variation in the level of support received by children when engaging in remote learning. Whilst over two thirds (69%) of P7 children surveyed agreed that they received sufficient support from teachers to help with school work, over one in ten (13%) indicated that they did not receive enough support over the course of the first lockdown.

Data from the YLTS (see Figure 4.3 below) presents a further concerning picture of variable or insufficient support from teachers. Just over half (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had received sufficient support from teachers during the second period of school closures. However, one fifth (23%) indicated that they did not.

It has been acknowledged by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)\(^5\) that there was ‘variation in pupil engagement with remote learning across year groups and schools’ during the first lockdown. In May 2021, the ETI published a series of phase specific thematic reports on remote learning.

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**Figure 4.2: Children’s perceptions of the support received from teachers during school closures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I got enough support from teachers to help me with my school work</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS

**Figure 4.3: Young people’s perceptions of the support received from teachers during school closures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I got enough support from teachers to help me with my school work</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: YLTS

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This reflected a consensus among school leaders and teachers that remote learning cannot replicate face-to-face teaching and there are certain areas of the curriculum which are challenging to deliver remotely. A further ETI review of primary school experiences between March and August 2020 reflected that regular engagement in online learning was a challenge, with schools reporting up to one-third of children not engaging regularly with online learning or experiencing digital fatigue. A ‘snapshot’ of pupils’ online engagement was generated by ETI via a week-long survey of school settings in the w/c 25th January 2021. Findings further revealed variation in pupils’ registration and access with online activities across settings. Qualitative feedback captured by the ETI review also highlighted that pupil engagement with remote learning was variable across special schools and year groups. In Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings, pupils were reported to disengage when platforms did not work, that re-engagement was slow, and in some instances that pupils would not engage online. Post-primary respondents noted that registration and/or logging on, do not equal engagement or active participation in the learning. The ETI Review highlighted that teachers were also impacted by access to suitable hardware and software, which in turn impacted on the quality of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Almost one fifth (18%) of primary school leaders indicated that teachers did not have access to the hardware needed to deliver effective remote learning; it was found that this contributed to inconsistency within and across schools.

In its COVID-19 statement, the Committee on the Rights of the Child urged States to ensure that online learning did not exacerbate existing inequalities or replace student-teacher interaction. However, when reflecting on the impacts of COVID-19 on education, several young people cited issues in gaining access to and support from teachers, and reflected on the challenges associated with receiving ‘real time’ feedback.

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13 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) Op Cit
“Online learning was probably the worst part of lockdown for myself and most people my age. It was very difficult to not be interacting with people/teachers, and to be motivated as there was no distinction between working and ‘relaxing’. This was also tough as there was little consistency between classes, and workload varied from subject to subject, and week to week.” (W4)

“With home learning its not been so easy to get support from teacher, tough when learning new things. [I] Send comments to teacher during class and only get feedback after class ends. Real time support is not available.” (F4)

A consistent theme arising from consultation with children and young people is that remote learning is not the same as in-school learning; with feedback reflecting the fact that it is less structured, largely untimetabled and that an undue degree of responsibility was placed on children and young people to manage their work in their own time. The latter was deemed particularly challenging for young people in exam years, many of whom talked about the weight of expectation placed on them in terms of the volume and range of work to be completed at home. Some had consequently dropped out. Many reflected on poor motivation; several commented on difficulty in maintaining focus at home, others made comments about on how they had fallen behind with their education:

“Yeah, I was just so unmotivated to like get up in the mornings and cause I had to do it all myself and there wasn’t really … like it wasn’t timetabled like it normally is at school and you had to have certain assignments by the end of the week and normally you’d leave them to last minute. I felt like I [was] getting double the amount of work at home as I would be at school.” (F5)

“I found it harder to focus when doing internet classes and internet classwork.” (W3)

Young people reported subsequent anxiety experienced as they feared falling behind in their studies or being at a disadvantage to peers, and that this would have a long-term impact on their educational achievement. They highlighted concern that, if such inconsistency in learning was to continue into the next term, this could compound the disruption to their learning. Some reflected significant stress and anxiety about returning to school due to fears that they had fallen behind.

“I don’t enjoy doing online learning and then have anxiety when I go to school. It’s hard to know what I have to do for exams which causes stress.” (W2)

“A lot of young people I know have become depressed and are worried about going back to school – I think there needs to be help for this.” (W3)

NICCY recognises that the Department of Education provided guidance to schools on remote learning and curriculum planning twice during the course of school closures14&15. The Department also asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning. Whilst the ETI review of remote learning found many examples of good practice across settings, evidence from children and young people suggests inconsistency in remote learning practices, variation in levels of engagement, and subsequent impacts on motivation, learning, and development.

In order to truly understand the extent of engagement and the subsequent impact on children’s development and attainment, there must be an assessment of the effectiveness of the education that children received and a benchmarking of any learning lost or gained over the last year.

**Barriers in remote learning – access to digital devices**

Much has been reported about the impact of the ‘digital divide’ on children and young people’s access to education. From the beginning of the pandemic, NICCY reflected on the critical need for consistency and quality in the provision of remote learning, and repeatedly called on the Department of Education and EA to provide supports to children, young people and their families to fully engage. We noted the specific challenges of online learning for children who have limited or no access to technology or the internet or do not have adequate parental support. We called for additional supports for these children to ensure equitability of learning and to prevent any exacerbation of existing inequalities, in line with the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

However, in NICCY’s experience, and as verified by various sources, not all children had the supports and resources required to enable them to engage fully with remote learning. Data from the KLTS revealed differences in children’s access to resources dependent on socio-economic background. Whilst 81% of all survey respondents indicated that they had all the resources required for home study during the first period of school closures, findings revealed that this was the case for just 74% of respondents from low affluent backgrounds compared with 83% from highly affluent backgrounds.

The survey also revealed differences in internet access by socio-economic background. Whilst promisingly, 90% of all KLTS respondents were able to access the internet, the findings revealed that 84% from low affluence had internet access compared with 90% from a highly affluent background.

The YLTS similarly highlighted that some young people did not have access to all the resources required for school closure (see figure 4.4 below), with just 73% indicating that they had access to all that they needed in terms of books, materials and IT equipment. This finding is especially concerning as the YLTS data captured young people’s experiences in May 2021, following the second period of school closures. It is alarming that some pupils felt they had insufficient access to resources by this stage of the school year.

### Figure 4.4: Young people’s perceptions of the sufficiency of resources available for remote learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Strongly disagree %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: YLTS*
Furthermore, there is a strong evidence base that highlights digital poverty as a barrier to enabling remote learning in areas where there are high levels of social deprivation and connectivity issues in rural areas. Schools have acknowledged an absence of, or an inadequate number of, appropriate digital devices for learning within the household, and an absence of, or reliable access to, broadband or wi-fi within the household as barriers to learning during both phases of lockdown.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, Stranmillis University College’s survey of parents/carers revealed a large portion of respondents whose children had limited access to devices (laptops, printers etc.)\textsuperscript{18}.

Such findings chime with reports received by NICCY of children and young people in need of a device but unable to gain access to one. Despite investment by DE in additional devices\textsuperscript{19} and a free Wi-Fi scheme for disadvantaged pupils\textsuperscript{20}, the relatively slow allocation of devices meant that many children were without a digital device for much of the first period of school closures. Indeed, some remained without during the second period of closure from January 2021. NICCY acknowledges that devices were prioritised to children in particular year groups (4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14) and with particular characteristics including those in receipt of free school meals, and who either had special educational needs, were newcomer children, were looked after children or were otherwise vulnerable. However, such an approach meant that some children were unable to gain access to a device despite it being needed. In ETI’s review of remote learning, over one-half of primary schools who engaged in focused discussions between January and February 2021, reported they did not have enough devices to provide for both key worker and vulnerable children in school and those engaged in remote learning at home\textsuperscript{21}. In discussions with post-primary schools, just over one-third indicated that the lending scheme criteria did not meet the needs of all pupils and that there was a continued shortage of devices for individual pupils\textsuperscript{22}.

Furthermore, NICCY’s research with vulnerable young people highlights that, despite characteristics that should have precipitated the provision of devices, some young people did not receive a device for quite some time.

“So at the moment my work is building up because I fell behind over lockdown because I had no access to a laptop. So I couldn’t have done any work, and it should be noted that the [course] I was doing was ICT.” (F5)

“I kind of got a bit lucky actually because some people actually didn’t have any devices. My social worker had asked the school to give me one, or I should say loan one out to me. So they gave me a laptop, and I was able to do it. But some people actually haven’t been able to do any work at all.” (F5)

Cognisant of the deeply negative implications for children who had no access to a digital device for much of lockdown, and were therefore largely unable to engage with home learning, NICCY repeatedly requested data on the number of children and young people

\textsuperscript{17} ETI publish phase-specific thematic reports on Remote Learning | Education Training Inspectorate - https://www.etini.gov.uk/news/eti-publish-phase-specific-thematic-reports-remote-learning


\textsuperscript{20} www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/weir-announces-free-wi-fi-scheme-disadvantaged-pupils

\textsuperscript{21} ETI (May 2021d) Op Cit

\textsuperscript{22} ETI (May 2021c) Op Cit
who remained without a digital device or access to the internet.

However, there appear to be gaps in the recording and monitoring of this information. Whilst the EA informed NICCY\(^\text{23}\) that it is the role of schools to identify eligible pupils who need IT equipment, it noted that the EA does not hold information on individual loans. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the EA captures information about all children and young people who require access to a device, or just those who meet the criteria to be prioritised for allocation. It is apparent that there needs to be a more robust method of recording and tracking the number of children and young people who require digital access, including the length of time that they have been waiting for it, and that this record needs to be centrally managed by EA, so it can appropriately plan and make provision for all children and young people in need.

Although all schools are now open on a full-time basis, the need to address digital exclusion remains, to ensure equity of experience, in case a pupil is required to isolate at home, and in case of future waves of the virus. Robust mechanisms must be established by the DE and EA to ensure that there is a central record of all children who require access to a device and/or the internet, and the number of children who remain without. Information must be provided by DE and EA on how they will assess and mitigate the impact of the delay in allocating devices on children and young people, including the additional supports that will be provided to these children.

Impacts of school closures on vulnerable children and young people

Whilst the full impact of school closures on children’s education and wellbeing is unlikely to be known for some time yet, it is evident that some groups of children and young people have experienced its effects more acutely than others. NICCY has previously reported the fact that the gaps in service delivery or disruption to existing provision have disproportionately impacted on children from vulnerable groups\(^\text{24}\); this was reinforced by the research conducted by QUB on behalf of NICCY. Groups most negatively affected include children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with special educational needs and disability in mainstream and special schools, and newcomer groups. Other vulnerable groups include those accessing EOTAS; receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection and looked after children services; those on the Child Protection Register; young carers; those with emerging and diagnosed mental health needs; and those who are affected by domestic violence.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child\(^\text{25}\) called for the protection of children whose vulnerability is likely to be further increased by the exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic. However, it is quite evident that it is those children and young people who were already facing significant barriers in accessing education that have been most gravely affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The continued closure of schools has undoubtedly exacerbated educational inequalities which were previously well documented before the pandemic.

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\(^{23}\) Correspondence from the EA to NICCY, 3rd February 2021.


\(^{25}\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) Op Cit
NICCY acknowledges that the Department of Education issued the Vulnerable Children and Young People – Contingency Planning Framework in December 2020, which was part of the wider cross-Departmental COVID-19 planning for vulnerable children and young people. However, it is not fully evident how effective this Framework was in ensuring the expedient identification and provision of support for vulnerable children and young people. As reflected by the findings of the QUB research, there is learning to be had from the Departmental efforts to try and identify numbers of ‘vulnerable’ children and who they might be.

NICCY welcomes that schools remained open for some vulnerable children and young people across both lockdowns and that additional guidance, and supports were implemented to protect the most vulnerable. NICCY recognises that EA continued to deliver a range of other services for vulnerable children. Nonetheless, it is evident that not all vulnerable children and young people engaged with supports and services, and it has been acknowledged that the number of vulnerable children attending schools, particularly during the first lockdown was low, as corroborated by data collected at that time. Furthermore, it is not wholly clear what supervised learning actually entailed; the level of teaching provided and the extent to which it met children and young people’s needs.

For several children and young people who did not attend school, particularly those with additional needs and vulnerabilities, remote learning was often not accessible.

As recognised by the UN policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on children, worldwide there has been inconsistency in quality and accessibility of online learning, especially for children with SEN and disability. An ETI review of remote learning in special schools identified particular challenges for non-verbal pupils and those with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

Local research has reinforced that for children and young people with SEN there is an extra layer of accessibility to be considered to meet visual and physical needs etc. In July 2020, a survey of parents of children with visual impairment conducted by Angel Eyes NI identified 60% of respondents whose children did not receive accessible resources.

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30 Education Minister’s statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response (21 May 2020) Available at: www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-education-minister-ad-hoc-committee
32 UN (2020) Op Cit
33 ETI (May 2021a) Op Cit
A further study by Ulster University\textsuperscript{35} found that parents of children with SEN were likely to experience a range of challenges when home schooling their children. The pandemic has also highlighted the additional barriers of remote learning for children with English as an additional or new language for whom learning materials were not necessarily provided in an appropriate format\textsuperscript{36}.

The pandemic has also exposed inequalities that exist between different groups of children in terms of their entitlement to educational support. For example, the QUB research reinforced the barriers for asylum seeking families in accessing support and other resources during the pandemic, including educational provisions. It also reflected a particular impact on newcomer children who had arrived with their families to Northern Ireland in February 2020 and who would usually have received intensive support over a number of months to settle into their new homes and schools. School closures clearly not only had an impact on the education of newcomer children but on settling into a new country – and learning a new language - at a critical time in their lives\textsuperscript{37}. Furthermore, being out of school has meant that these children have missed out on the immersive learning that they typically gain from a classroom setting. As one newcomer young person told NICCY, being out of college led to a significant reduction in their opportunities to practise English, which has impacted on their confidence to speak English after lockdown.

“I mean, because of the lockdown I only socialise with people on the phone, probably more from my country and I don’t talk as much as English before. So because of that, that will be another problem. When I can’t really speak English as good as before or when I don’t feel enough confidence that would be something that I am worried about, nervous about. I mean when we get back to normal life, you can’t really communicate with people as you could before, as well as before if you know (what) I mean?” (F5)

A similar theme has been highlighted in the context of Irish Medium provision. ETI have reflected that remote learning offered reduced opportunities for the children to converse and learn through Irish both remotely and, in many instances, in the home environment is leading to a number of children who are losing their fluency in spoken Irish\textsuperscript{38}.

Impacts on EOTAS provision

Evidence suggests that the pandemic placed specific challenges on Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings. As reported by ETI\textsuperscript{39}, a number of centres reported non-attendance for a small number of pupils with complex needs, including severe anxiety, and for those whose parent/carer is shielding. The report also noted a shortfall in educational psychology support across centres, and no access to youth work support in others, which impacted negatively on the quality of interventions, especially for pupils who are extremely vulnerable.

\textsuperscript{35} Ulster University (July 2020) Northern Ireland Parent Surveys: Experiences of Supporting Children’s Home Learning during COVID-19 UNESCO Centre, School of Education, Ulster University.


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid

\textsuperscript{38} ETI (May 2021d) Op Cit

Direct feedback from young people in secure care reflected the disruption to their education, noting that due to social distancing requirements across units, teaching was only received 1–2 times a week.

“Yes, they’re [teaching staff] here every day but like it’s certain times isn’t it? Like they’ll stay for a certain time but obviously when you’re in school, you’re in school all day. [It’s] one or two days a week which is really sh** because I love school, I love being in school.” (F6)

During the pandemic, NICCY expressed concern about the levels of education made available to the young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and identified the need for this to be addressed by the EA and the Youth Justice Agency. Further detail is included in Chapter 9.

Impacts on children with SEN and disability

There is also much evidence of the adverse impacts of the pandemic on children and young people with SEN and disability, whose access to vital educational and health supports was drastically reduced over the course of the pandemic. In many cases it has exacerbated an already difficult situation that children and young people were facing before the start of the pandemic in accessing their right to education.

Between April and August 2020, children with SEN and disability experienced a dilution in the supports and services that they are legally entitled to, due to the temporary deployment of the ‘Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties’. DE recurrently issued this Notice to address the impact that the outbreak would have on the ability of EA, schools, health and social services to meet their legal duties as a result of reduced resources. It resulted in significant restrictions on the supports and services available to children and young people with SEN and disability, and had profoundly detrimental effects on the education, health and wellbeing of children with SEN and disabilities, as well as on parents, carers and siblings; many of whom informed NICCY that they were at breaking point. The abrupt suspension of services, coupled with the closure of schools, meant that many parent/carers experienced a withdrawal of vital respite services and their children missing out on support received prior to the pandemic. A ‘perfect storm’ ensued, which resulted in some families having to resort to severe measures, including the

“I felt like I had learned virtually nothing over the lockdown period. It was also stressful as someone with depression and anxiety to return to my normal friend groups and get the courage to leave the house again as at one point I had spent 3 months inside without leaving my house. It felt like I was leaving what was safe to me, which was being at home, also returning to the same schedule without any sort of transition was stressful and led to many panic attacks and nights spent crying. I think also having to do assessments and the uncertainty of what was happening with my GCSEs was very stressful, I felt like I had already failed them before they started.”

Young person, YLTS
use of chemical restraints as their children went without critical medical and therapeutic interventions normally provided by specialist services and their Special School setting. See Chapters 3 and 6 for further detail on the impact of the pandemic on access to specialist services.

Perhaps one of the greatest frustrations and concerns about this period is that, although the Executive had said vulnerable children should have access to school, several special schools did not stay open. Mid-way through the first lockdown at the end of May 2020, the EA informed NICCY that just 15 out of 39 special schools were open to pupils. Whilst published data gathered over that period does not provide a breakdown of attendance of children with SEN in either mainstream or special school settings, research conducted by the Family Fund highlighted that, prior to returning for the new school year in September 2020, less than one in five children and young people with a disability (17%) had attended their nursery, school or college since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In January 2021, while mainstream schools were to close to the majority of pupils apart from those of key workers and vulnerable children, the Minister of Education issued a directive requiring all Special Schools to remain open during the second lockdown for over 6,000 children and young people. However, due to a variety of issues including high workforce absence, again, a number of schools were only able to offer part-time provision. NICCY outlined a series of recommendations at that time including the need for action to address staff absence; for greater transparency and accountability regarding the measures being taken to keep schools open; and the need for improved communications and consultation with schools and parents. Whilst NICCY received assurance that, as of end April 2021, all special schools were operating on a full-time basis, the recommendations previously made still stand. It is critical that the Department of Education, the EA, Health and Social Care, and Special Schools Principals and Boards of Governors identify and resolve the issues that prevented Special Schools from offering full-time education and learn from that experience.

**Further provision required**

Additional supports must be provided to children and young people who were unable to fully engage with learning during school closures. NICCY welcomes investment in school summer schemes and also that a much higher number of schools applied to deliver schemes this year compared with 2020. It is essential that as many children and young people as possible have access to a holistic programme of activities and supports over the summer months. NICCY also welcomes further investment in the Engage 2 Programme for September 2021 to March 2022, and that this has been broadened to funded pre-school education settings, special schools, and EOTAS settings. However, it is unfortunate that this provision was not available to all

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41 Correspondence from the EA to NICCY 4th June 2020.
44 Weir announces £4.5m for School Summer Scheme | Department of Education - [https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/weir-announces-ps45m-school-summer-scheme](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/weir-announces-ps45m-school-summer-scheme)
settings in 2020/21. It is also not apparent what impact the first Engage Programme had on children and young people, whether all pupils who required support in primary and post-primary settings were able to avail of it, or whether it fully met the needs of those who received support. The second roll out of the Engage Programme must build on the learning from the first, and crucially be aligned with children’s needs. Furthermore, it is critical that robust evaluation data is gathered to explore the impact of both school summer schemes and the Engage 2 Programme and that there is an ongoing identification of any further supports required by children and young people.

**Exams**

As outlined in the previous chapters, it is evident that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. The closure of schools and colleges, academic uncertainty, children having less contact with their peer group, the disruption to routine together with concerns about contracting the virus have exacerbated existing mental health problems among children and young people. It has been reported that the cancellation of public examinations, coupled with a period of uncertainty about the arrangements for summer 2020 contributed to anxiety for pupils, parents and teachers. Further upheaval was caused by the outworkings of the alternative awarding process and the issues arising from the statistical standardisation model which led to a change to the methodology for awarding grades after initial results were published.

In NICCY’s experience, further significant anxiety and stress was experienced by young people following the re-opening of schools in September 2020. NICCY received numerous reports from autumn 2020 of the pressures being placed on children and young people due to continuous assessment. The uncertainty about whether summer 2021 exams would go ahead meant that, from the first period of term, young people were faced with repeated assessment as schools prepared for the eventuality that exams would be cancelled and grades would, again, be based on centre assessment. At that time, the Commissioner made clear that the situation was untenable, and that immediate action was needed to alleviate the stress experienced by young people. She called for exams to be cancelled and a robust framework for centre assessed grades to be co-produced by CCEA, schools, young people and other stakeholders.

However, it was not until January 2021 that the Minister confirmed the summer 2021 exams series would not proceed. Instead, the approach to awarding grades in summer 2021 was to be based on teacher professional judgements, with moderation. In March 2021, CCEA released its guidance to centres on the alternative awarding arrangements. This set out that centres should use a range of evidence to base judgement on pupils’ grades; the type, range, and number of pieces of evidence was at the discretion of schools.

Years 12 – 14 pupils returned to full time face-to-face teaching from 22 March 2021. From then, young people reported further continuous assessment and extreme stress.

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and anxiety arising from an exceedingly high volume of assessment. NICCY received a range of deeply concerning reports from various young people about the pressures being placed on them. Several informed us that they faced numerous assessments as they soon as they returned to school:

“Exams happened the very first week back and there is another set in two weeks’ time, so it’s been quite stressful.” (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

“It’s been stressful because we have just launched into assessments that decide our grades.” (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

There was a perception by young people that, rather than reducing the level of assessment, the decision to cancel the summer 2021 exams series had generated the same, if not more, work than would have been the case had they been sitting formal examinations. Several comments reflected the physical and mental strain on young people, and that it had a detrimental impact on relationships with teachers.

“We are still being assessed like for me anyway I am being assessed the way I would have been last year, like it’s the same exams, it’s the same thing, like well we’re not doing exams; that’s the only thing that’s been cut, but it’s that exact same coursework”. (F3)
“There’s never been more irony in the thought of sending us back to school for our mental health, when these expectations of exams have been the pinnacle of the destruction of the mental health of young people this year!” (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

“Being so burnt out and exhausted from the very short study period we have been given to cover these assessments, I am aware that many young people (myself included) feel that they will not have the right mental ability to begin to learn a completely new course and do not have a positive attitude towards returning to school for the rest of this term overall.” (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

The above are just a small sample of the responses received by young people with regards the extraordinary stress and pressure arising from continuous assessment.

Of further concern is the inconsistency in approach across schools both in terms of the type and level of evidence that can be drawn on when generating grades. All schools have been required to develop and submit to CCEA a Centre Determined Grades policy outlining their approach to and the evidence that will be considered when determining grades. NICCY understands that flexibility in the process has been enabled so that the evidence selected by schools is reflective of the level of content covered by individual schools. Nonetheless, pupils have legitimate concerns about variation across schools in the type and range of evidence used to determine grades. Feedback from the NICCY youth panel also reflects that some schools did not proactively engage young people in discussion about the evidence being used to determine grades. Whilst CCEA has informed schools that the Centre Determined Grades Policy should be accessible to students and parents to ensure they are aware of the evidence that will be used for producing Centre Determined Grades, few youth panel members indicated that they had received or had sight of this policy. At the end of April 2021, one third of youth panel members indicated that they had not received an explanation of the evidence being used by their teacher to generate grades. This is despite the fact that schools had collected the bulk of the evidence required for teacher assessed grades by that point.

It is therefore critical that this year’s appeals service enables pupils to raise concerns about the fairness and validity of the process upon which their grades were based. It is only right and fair that every pupil is able to instruct their school this year to conduct a review and to submit an appeal to CCEA on their behalf. NICCY welcomes that the post results service proposes grounds for appeal both on the basis of procedural/administrative errors and where it is considered that there has been an unreasonable exercise of academic judgement made by schools. Young people’s right to appeal must be upheld and be founded on the principles of transparency, cooperation and fairness.

NICCY also welcomes that 2021/22 will see pupils facing “significantly fewer” exams in each subject. We cannot underestimate the disruption to pupils’ learning over the past two school years, particularly with regards their personal, social, and emotional development. It is therefore critical that the reduction in exams enables young people space and time to enjoy their right to education, to access supports to enhance their emotional health and wellbeing, and engage in a wide range of enrichment activities. However, a reduction in content must not be to the detriment of learning, skills and development and must therefore be closely monitored in consultation with pupils and schools. There must also be ongoing contingency planning for alternative
awarding in 2022 in case of any change in the public health situation. This must build on the learning of the determination of centre assessed grades in 2021 and, essentially, must ensure young people are at the heart of discussions and decision making.

**Transfer Test**

There is grave concern that an undue focus on assessment not only diverted the emphasis from wellbeing and education recovery for GCSE, AS and A Level students, but also for Year 7 pupils amidst continued uncertainty about the Transfer Test. The outbreak of COVID-19 has placed a further spotlight on the adverse consequences of this unregulated system. The unacceptable pressure placed on children as young as 10 and 11 years to perform in the Transfer Test, and the resultant negative impacts on children’s health and wellbeing add weight to the calls for the cancellation of the tests, not least given that pupils have missed out on months of learning. This academic year has seen inexcusable pressure heaped on our year 6 and 7 children which has been further compounded by last minute postponements, cancellations, and confused and contradictory communications. NICCY has publicly condemned the events of January 2021 which saw our Year 7 students and their parents caught up in a maelstrom of indecision, poor direction, and dogged determination to progress with the assessments despite the fact that schools were closed due to the risk of COVID-19. This culminated in the late decision to cancel the assessments, however, not before children and their families were subjected to the undue stress and uncertainty of whether the tests would go ahead.

The 2020/21 procedure for transfer from primary to post-primary education further exacerbated a challenging time for Year 7 pupils. The Commissioner wrote to all Boards of Governors across Northern Ireland in May 2020, indicating that it was their responsibility to modify their admissions criteria in such a way as to avoid putting children through additional stress. This was followed by repeated calls for the cancellation of the Transfer Tests and alternative contingency arrangements to be created by DE working in unison with schools. However, no such alternative arrangements were made. Whilst DE published Circular 2016/1550 which set out recommended admissions criteria that post-primary schools should use for Year 8 admissions and which Boards of Governors had to have regard to, the Department’s approval was not required for each school’s admissions criteria. This generated further concern about the equitability and consistency of criteria applied across schools. As the guidance was not compulsory, it resulted in different schools imposing differing criteria, some being unfair on certain children. NICCY predicted problems around this area and invited the Department of Education to take stronger action in preparing contingency plans. Regrettably this did not happen. On the 12th June 2021, it became apparent that 280 pupils had not secured a placement in their chosen school. Many children were not allocated their 1st choice, whilst others were not allocated a place at all. Consequently, a significant number of queries were raised with NICCY’s Legal and Investigations Team, with serious concern expressed about the impact on children’s mental health and wellbeing as a result of not having a confirmed school place.

The resultant anxiety, bewilderment, frustration, and upset caused for children and their parents as a result of this year’s transfer process cannot be permitted to happen again. We must learn from the
failings of last year and enable a robust alternative arrangements process which ensures equitability and accessibility for all.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, we reflected on the potential long lasting effects of school closures on children’s learning, development, and wellbeing. It is imperative that there is a concerted, collaborative effort to ensure the safe and sustainable opening of our schools, building on the learning from the previous lockdowns. There must be a focus on building resilience in the system in order to maintain the education of our children, to reduce the risk of outbreaks, and to respond when these occur. It is also essential that robust plans are in place to ensure seamless continuity if disruptions occur between home study and study at school to facilitate blended learning so that disruption of services and education for children can be kept to a minimum. This should include assessing needs for future home study and inter-agency planning to promptly meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people, including those who may be required to shield. This will be critical in case of further waves of the pandemic, in case of local outbreaks, or in individual cases where some pupils may be required to isolate. In such instances, measures must be put in place to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the arrangements for home learning.

Going forward, further DE guidance should continue to outline the minimum requirements to which each school should be expected to adhere. Additionally, DE should provide all necessary support to EA, CCMS, other educational bodies and schools to ensure that they can remain open safely and fulfil children’s right to education.

Future guidance should address levels of support and education as well as safety measures. It should also address the needs and experience of those children who have been disadvantaged by the lockdown, are vulnerable and/or have special educational needs.

The evidence suggests that there is much room for learning not just in terms of how to ensure children’s right to an effective education can be realised in emergency situations but also in ensuring that the existing inequalities are not exacerbated among marginalised groups of children. Contrary to recommendation from the Committee on the Rights of the Child, it is evident that online learning has exacerbated existing inequalities.

It is those children who were previously facing barriers to education who have been most adversely affected by school closures. Not all children were able to access learning in an accessible and the most appropriate manner. Nor was every child able to access the devices or connectivity required to facilitate effective remote learning. The recovery process presents an opportunity to address some of the educational inequalities in a meaningful way. It is critical that there is no further widening of the educational attainment gap, particularly for our most vulnerable children and young people, and therefore evidence must be provided to show that all children are experiencing their right to an effective education.
Recommendations

4.1 In order to truly understand the extent of engagement and the subsequent impact on children’s development and attainment, there must be an assessment of the effectiveness of the education that children received during school closures and a benchmarking of any learning lost or gained over the course of lockdown.

4.2 Education and Health Bodies should report on how they have identified, met, and will continue to provide for the needs of vulnerable children, and ensure that issues which previously prevented the full-time opening of special schools are identified and addressed.

4.3 Ongoing guidance and support must be provided to schools to ensure safe and sustainable openings and robust plans be in place to effect facilitation of blended learning should disruptions occur between home study and study at school.

4.4 Robust mechanisms must be established by the DE and EA to ensure that there is a central record of all children who require access to a device and/or the internet, and the number of children who remain without.

4.5 Additional supports must be provided to children and young people who were unable to fully engage with learning during school closures. Robust evaluation data must be gathered to explore the impact of school summer schemes and the Engage 2 Programme and there must be an ongoing identification of any further supports required by children and young people.

4.6 There must be ongoing contingency planning for alternative awarding in 2022 in case of any change in the public health situation. This must build on the learning of the determination of centre assessed grades in 2021 and, essentially, must ensure young people are at the heart of discussions and decision making.

4.7 The Department of Education must work with schools to establish alternative contingency arrangements for the transfer from primary to post-primary school. This must include a set of common admissions criteria which must be statutorily enforced by the Department of Education to ensure equitability and accessibility for all pupils.
“The most difficult things faced by young people and children during the pandemic, I feel, is the stress of school and expectations to get good grades and complete school work, when at home where some people do not have access or time to complete or teach themselves, due to outside influences i.e., looking after younger siblings etc. I feel the government need to address the issue of children not being able to access resources they would in school, like computers, textbooks, etc. so that all children have an equal chance to get a good education. This needs to be a permanent change made by the government so all children own a computer have their own resources to do homework, not just a short time fix or borrow from school.”

Young person, YLTS

“Covid was still quite prevalent within society, I felt that returning back to school was a mistake on behalf of the department of education, as they disregarded the physical welfare of many students. I live with my grandmother who is in her 70s, and I had to attend school. How is it fair that the department of education did this on top of that, they lacked a concise and clear message and the year began in chaos and now it is ending in chaos. Nobody knew what to do, nobody currently knows what to do, especially in regard to examinations.”

Young person, YLTS
5. PLAY, LEISURE AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
Introduction

Article 31 of UNCRC states that State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. State Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. In 2011, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) provided clarity on the meaning and importance of Article 31 through publishing General Comment 17. This highlighted the critical role of play in children and young people’s lives and in supporting the development of health, wellbeing and education.

In its COVID-19 statement\(^1\), the Committee urges decision-makers to explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their Article 31 rights when making emergency plans during a crisis (UN, 2020a, para. 2). Additionally, the most recent General Comment, No. 25 (UN 2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, is particularly relevant for the implementation of children’s Article 31 rights in the modern world, particularly during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, as services moved online.

Also relevant to this chapter is Article 15 of the UNCRC, recognising the rights of the child to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly. There are few restrictions permitted on this right, however one is the protection of public health, for example in response to a pandemic such as COVID-19. Children also have a right to freedom of movement under Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This chapter looks at the background to how the government response to COVID-19 restricted children and young people’s freedom of movement and freedom of association, and therefore restricted their right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. It draws heavily on the surveys and focus groups with children and young people, which demonstrate that the restrictions on their social interaction, leisure activities and freedom of movement have been felt very deeply. When Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) respondents were asked ‘what was the most difficult thing experienced by children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic that must be addressed by Government’, social isolation, not being able to see friends was one of the most frequent responses, alongside educational disruptions and the impact on their mental health.

Background to Lockdown Restrictions

For much of the period since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the government’s guidance stipulated that youth centres, leisure and entertainment venues such as theatres, concert halls, cinemas, amusement arcades, bowling alleys, skating rinks, inflatable parks, go-karting venues, soft play centres, fairgrounds and funfairs, indoor museums, galleries, visitor and other cultural attractions were not permitted to open. As the scientific evidence emerged that younger children were less affected by the disease, and the risks of contracting COVID-19 in outdoor spaces were not as high as originally thought, the Northern Ireland Executive started to lift some restrictions in July 2020. This allowed organisations working with children and

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\(^1\) UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2020) Statement on Impacts of COVID Pandemic on Children and Young People.
young people to arrange some face-to-face contact and socially distanced group work, and children and young people had more freedom to meet outside over the summer.

Despite the reopening of schools in August 2020, the restrictions on sport, play, leisure and recreational activities continued in an attempt to minimise the spread of the virus. Schools operated in classroom bubbles, and the argument was made that any indoor or outdoor sport would lead to a mixing of bubbles which in turn could have led to higher levels of transmission and schools having to close again. As the restrictions were tightened in the autumn, children and young people were at least able to spend time with their peers in person at school.

When the second lockdown was introduced in December 2020, once again education and essential support programmes returned to online formats for most children and young people. While schools opened up to all children and young people after Easter 2021, and there has been some easing once more, the restrictions on sport, play, leisure and recreational activities continued and have caused significant hardship to children and young people.

Locked down at home

Many children and young people spoke generally about feeling lonely and trapped, particularly during the first lockdown when they couldn’t physically go out and meet anyone, and even play parks were closed for many months. At this time, people were only able to take one short walk a day and weren’t allowed to sit outside in public. While people could be outside in their own gardens, many didn’t have an outside space. Young people told us that staying indoors all day was very difficult.

To understand how many children and young people’s homes didn’t provide adequate living space during lockdown, we asked respondents to the Kids Life and Times Survey (KLTS) and the Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) whether they agreed with the following statements:

- ‘I had enough inside space for play/leisure activities and to study’
- ‘I had enough outdoor space (e.g., garden) to keep active / spend time’.

As Figure 5.1 demonstrates, while the majority of children and young people responding indicated that their home provided enough

Figure 5.1 Adequacy of indoor and outdoor space in lockdown (%)

![Figure 5.1 Adequacy of indoor and outdoor space in lockdown](image)

Source KLTS, YLTS

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2 With exceptions made for Special Schools, and vulnerable children and children of key workers.

3 Note that, due to the different timeframes for the survey fieldwork, the question was asked in the KLTS in relation to the first lockdown period, while it was asked in the YLTS in relation to the second lockdown period.
indoor and outdoor space, a significant proportion did not have adequate space. The 16 year olds responding to the YLTS were more likely to say that their outside or inside spaces were inadequate (17% and 17%) than the younger children (7% and 4% respectively).

As Figure 5.2 below shows, the homes of children from ‘low affluence’ families were significantly more likely to provide inadequate indoor and outdoor space for study and recreational activity than those from ‘high affluence’ families. Moreover, they were more likely to report restrictions on their outside space than space inside their home.

Clearly, while lockdown placed restrictions on all children and young people, those living in smaller homes without outdoor spaces, or in overcrowded housing, as reported to us by young Roma children, suffered particular hardship. Given the duration of the two lockdown periods, each over several months, these were substantial constraints on the lives of thousands of children and young people.

Connecting online
The QUB report found that the impacts of COVID-19 on children’s social and personal development and on recreation services happened immediately when schools and other youth facilities closed abruptly in March 2020 and face-to-face programmes, managed by statutory, community and voluntary sectors ceased to operate. Initially, there was a sense among the child and youth sector groups that recreational activity had been the lowest priority in the wider scheme of things. This was problematic, not only for the children but also for the organisations who deliver such programmes as they relied on external funding and had contractual obligations to deliver their services.

As children and youth sector organisations adapted to the realities of delivering services and programmes online, the QUB report found that this was an important source of support for children and young people. While previously many parents and organisations had been ambivalent about children and young people engaging online, this became extremely important in maintaining contact with them in lockdown. Many children and young people valued the chance to connect online with existing programmes or to receive one-to-one/group support, and other recreational activities. When they were unable to see friends in person during

Figure 5.2 Adequacy of indoor and outdoor space in lockdown by family affluence (%)

Source: KLTS

5 Ibid
lockdown, online engagement also provided an important avenue for children and young people to maintain contact with friends. However, not all children and young people were able to avail of such opportunities, due to limited or no access to digital devices and/or internet access.

In the KLTS and YLTS, children and young people were asked whether they agreed with the statement ‘I could talk to / contact friends as much as I wanted to’ during lockdown. While the majority in both surveys agreed, almost one in five younger children responding to the KLTS (18%) and one in ten young people responding to YLTS (10%) disagreed. As figure 5.3 below shows, the KLTS data indicates that children from ‘low affluence’ backgrounds were significantly more likely to report being unable to talk with their friends as much as they wanted in lockdown, compared to those from ‘high affluence’ backgrounds.

Some young people responding to the YLTS highlighted how much more difficult it was for children and young people who weren’t able to speak with friends in lockdown.

“The most difficult thing was not crossing households and children not able to go and see their friends. But more so the ones that do not have any other means of contact with them.” (YLTS)

“Younger children who are unable to use social media cannot contact their friends. They are not able to develop social skills which are important to prevent introverted behaviours when they grow up. Everyone’s mental health has been affected but for some other kids it is more manageable if they have access to social media.” (YLTS)

Some young people didn’t engage as much on social media, or via video calls but instead interacted while playing games on X-Box or PlayStation. For many of these young people, gaming online was a lifeline, helping overcome social isolation.

**Pressures of home schooling**

As education moved to home learning in lockdown, many young people felt that the boundaries between school and leisure time had blurred. Not being able to socialise with friends or take part in sports or recreational activities meant that there were few opportunities to vent.

“My outlet from the harsh reality of school was horse riding which I could not attend for 6 months and it is the same for others with sports such as GAA, dancing, football etc. Home schools is often said to be easy and children are constantly reminded how they are not getting an education, when in fact I believe home school was far more stressful
than normal school. All my outlets from school were gone, I felt overwhelmed and that I couldn’t escape it the way I used to. You can come home from school but during home schooling it was hard to differentiate between home and school.” (YLTS)

Summer 2020: Opening up of restrictions

In the middle of May 2020, some restrictions were eased, allowing limited outdoor interactions and further relaxations were allowed over the summer. When asked about their social interactions and access to play and leisure activities after the lockdown had eased (see figure 5.4 below), the majority of children and young people responding to YLTS and KLTS indicated that they had been able to meet up with friends. However, one in ten (10%) of the young people responding to YLTS, and more than one in five (22%) of the children responding to the KLTS indicated that this had not been the case for them, a proportion of whom reported that they did not want to do this.

As some parks had been closed, we included questions on the KLTS and YLTS about whether respondents had been able to play or spend time in parks (see figure 5.5 below). Again, a majority indicated that they had been able to do this, although 38% of children and 33% of young people had said that they weren’t able, or didn’t want to, spend time in parks.

While the easing of restrictions allowed most children and young people to get outside more and to meet up with friends, many felt great anxiety about social contact because they were shielding or because of vulnerable family members. Other young people felt that, as restrictions eased parents interpreted rules differently, meaning that there was an inconsistency in the freedom children and young people had to meet up and get involved in activities again.

Figure 5.4 Response to question asking if they were able to meet up with friends post-lockdown

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>YLTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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Source: KLTS, YLTS

Figure 5.5 Response to question asking if they were able to play or spend time in parks after lockdown

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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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</table>

Source: KLTS, YLTS
“Young people with strict parents not being allowed to see anyone due to restrictions (was difficult). I hadn’t seen friends from October 2020 until April 2021 due to restrictions yet others with less strict parents had good mental health as they were allowed.” (YLTS)

Many young people also reported feeling judged by adults when they met with friends outside, even when they were complying with the government regulations. This is considered later in this chapter.

Autumn 2020: returning to school

For many children and young people returning to school in August/September was extremely important in allowing them to see their peers face to face and to get back to a level of normality in relation to their education. The Commissioner was a strong advocate for the prioritisation of children and young people’s education, and the Northern Ireland Executive tightened restrictions again to try to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

As many children and young people had become very isolated, and routines had changed over the previous five months, many had difficulties transitioning back to school.

“The aftermath of the pandemic has impacted on young people’s mental health. From going to staying at the house every second of every day surrounded by your family to out in the world again by yourself not comforted by your family. It was a big change. I think that the move back into school should have been more gradual, we should have been eased in.” (YLTS)

“Try not to put them under massive stress as we are only coming back from having months off of school, and we have to come back to a place where are not used to the setting and have to wake up early, which can be mentally draining for us.” (YLTS)

When asked about returning to school in August/September 2020, 29% of the children responding to the KLTS said that they had been anxious about this and 19% said that their parents had been anxious. A larger proportion of the 16-year-olds responding to YLTS reported being anxious (38%) and 29% said that their parents had been anxious.

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, while schools had been advised to have a focus on mental and emotional wellbeing, the pressures of trying to limit the spread of COVID-19 and prepare young people for assessments added to the stresses on those returning to school. Extra-curricular activities were also curtailed to a large degree to limit the spread of the virus.

The two surveys also asked children and young people if they had been able to take part in their normal extra-curricular activities after returning to school (see table 5.1 on next page). Fifty-six percent of children responding to the KLTS, and 40% of the young people responding to the YLTS said they were not able to do so. Conversely, only 4% of children and 5% of the young people responding were able to take part in all the extra-curricular activities with which they were previously involved.
Table 5.1: Participation in extra-curricular activities on return to school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Since returning to school, have you been able to take part in the extra-curricular activities you normally would have been involved in (e.g., choir, clubs, sports etc.)’</th>
<th>KLTS</th>
<th>YLTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, all of them</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, some of them</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not involved in extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS, YLTS

“Keep us in school and if schools are open, allow us to take part in things such as dance schools and sporting clubs.” (YLTS)

A question was included on both KLTS and YLTS asking about whether they had been able to take part in group sports or cultural activities such as choir, dance or drama more generally since the end of the first lockdown. This found that the majority of children had not taken part in these activities, either because they could not, or did not want to. The children responding to KLTS were more likely to say that they were not able to take part (44%) than young people responding to YLTS (23%) (See Figure 5.6 below).

The response to this question varies significantly by the socio-economic status of the child’s family. As Table 5.2 below shows, children from ‘high affluence’ families were almost twice as likely to say they were able to take part in group sports or activities post lockdown than those from ‘low affluence’ families (45% compared to 25%).

Table 5.2 Proportion of children taking part in group sports or activities post-lockdown, by affluence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low affluence (%)</th>
<th>Medium affluence (%)</th>
<th>High affluence (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I haven’t wanted to do this</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS

Further lockdown and reopening

By Christmas 2020 the numbers of COVID-19 infections and hospital admissions had risen again and so a second lockdown period was introduced on 26 December. This meant a second period of home schooling for children and young people, and
restrictions on their ability to see friends and participate in sport, cultural and other recreational activities. While these restrictions were a little less severe than under the first lockdown, almost half of young people (45%) responding to the YLTS reported finding this second lockdown more difficult than the first.

**Figure 5.7 Comparisons between first and second lockdown: young people’s experiences**

The QUB report found that the youth sector responded quickly to this second lockdown and reported being more prepared to continue their services than during the first lockdown. However, they observed that while in the first stage of lockdown, interacting online was new and fun, as restrictions continued the novelty wore off and a drop in online engagement occurred. It was clear to youth workers that while the digital environment allowed for social interaction, play, some life-skills, physical and arts-based activities to continue, it was less successful for meaningful cross-border, and cross-community peace building and integration initiatives.

“Most people want to wait just now until we can meet up again rather than bothering with technology” [QUB report, CI Group]

**Impact of restrictions on social interactions and recreational/play activities**

It is clear from the comments from the children and young people we engaged with through the surveys and focus groups, how important friendships and developing relationships are throughout childhood and into the teenage years, and how deeply they have felt the restrictions on their social interactions.

“Well for young people I would say (the worst thing is) the loss of family and friends. Throughout my own experience most of my friends kind of drifted apart then when we all came back together things didn’t feel the same. And for children I would say the time they have lost spending time outdoors and being with friends because they’re never going to get that time back.” [YLTS]

As one care experienced young person told us:

“…when you are young your friends are your everything and like you are always with your friends whether that’s in school or going out or even going to the shops or something and then like suddenly there’s none of that.” [F3]

Many expressed a deep sense of loss, for important times that they felt they missed and never would get back.

“Many younger children had their childhoods stolen from them.” [YLTS]

“We lost out on most of our youth.” [YLTS]

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There were a wide range of social and recreational events and activities that children and young people talked about missing out on, including a range of sports and fitness activities, musical activities such as concerts, orchestra, choir, drama, church and bible camps, youth clubs/centres, school activities and school trips.

**Impact on transitions and key social occasions**

The QUB report drew attention to the disruption to key transitions in the lives of children and young people. They pointed out that some young people appeared to have been overlooked or ‘forgotten’ in respect of the disruption to existing provision.

This was certainly something that young people responding to the YLTS identified as particularly difficult. While there was a general sense of having missed out of childhood and teenage experiences, many talked about specific key events or occasions that they were missing out on that were important for transitions, to bring closure or to have memories for the future.

“Us teenagers never got our teen years lives like prom and a leavers day. It was all socially distanced goodbyes and no fully closed chapters.” (YLTS)

“(The most difficult thing was) missing out on the usual teenage experiences that all other generations got to experience, e.g., formal, last days, even GCSEs. We’ve given up our teenage years while still being blamed for the spread of COVID by the government.” (YLTS)

“So I left school and I didn’t get my leavers so they sent home a leaver scrapbook which was lovely. All the teachers wrote something.” (F2)

“Those who started a new school during the pandemic most likely have found it harder to make friends if they keep having classes online or if they are in school and have no after school clubs to meet people with similar interests.” (YLTS)

In a focus group with young people from a Traveller community there was a perception of enhanced anxiety among young women as marriages had been put on hold. They reported that their cultural practice is that girls are expected to marry at 16 or 17 and for many young women not being able to do this with a large celebration caused great distress. (F10)

**Impact of restrictions on social development of early years children**

Playboard undertook a collaborative project with Stranmillis University College and the Controlled Schools’ Support Council to examine the impact of COVID-19 on play in early years classrooms with a particular focus on Nursery and Foundation Stage.7

Over half of respondents (59%) felt that restrictions impacted negatively on children in terms of their social skills, their levels of independence, their ability to stay on task and overall enhanced anxiety. This was also highlighted by young people responding to YLTS who highlighted the difficulties experienced by younger children:

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7 [http://www.playboard.org/covid-19-restrictions-impacting-childrens-play/](http://www.playboard.org/covid-19-restrictions-impacting-childrens-play/) The survey was undertaken between January and March 2021 by early years teachers and 291 responses were received.
“I also think children’s development has been affected as my little brother could not attend playgroup so he had not socialised with anyone his age and still has problems speaking.” (YLTS)

However, a sizeable minority (41%) of those responding to the Playboard/Stranmillis survey indicated that children were more independent in terms of self-care routines, more settled in class, happier and more relaxed, and displayed increased levels of resilience and coping skills. The survey also highlighted the high level of creativity, improvisation and dedication invested on the part of early years teachers to ensure that young children have, in the main, continued to enjoy a stimulating, playful and nurturing learning experience, despite the many challenges. Two thirds of respondents (66%) reported making greater use of the outdoors, while the same number felt restrictions, alongside intense cleaning regimes, had impacted negatively on the quality of play, resulting in more sterile play and learning spaces.8

Impact of restrictions on social activities on physical and mental health

Many children and young people responding to the KLTS and YLTS talked about how important sports, social and cultural activities are for them, to keep fit, to spend time with friends, and to deal with the stresses of life. Furthermore, the restrictions on sporting activities had impacted on the physical health of many young people. Several talked about the impact of the pandemic restrictions on their body image, with some putting on weight due to a lack of activity, others having developed eating disorders, due to the greater influence of ‘social influencers’.9 One young carer reported having previously been very active in sports, but not being able to participate during the pandemic, and now being reluctant to return to sports when they reopen due to having gained weight. (W1)

The impact of social isolation on children and young people’s mental health was a common theme, with many talking about themselves or others feeling lonely, bored, depressed, anxious and disconnected.

“…and not being able to socialise in person has affected many people’s social skills and some people have developed things such as social anxiety. It was also really damaging on people’s mental health.” (YLTS)

A young man who was a refugee, living independently, talked about how lockdown had affected him, and the links between social isolation, motivation, physical health and mental health.

“So probably lack of motivation would be an important impact. Before, we were going to college, we were going to basketball training, and all of those things could motivate us for life, you know. But where at the moment with lockdown you can lose your motivation, like very easily. (…) Also, physical health would be another one. I mean there’s no training, also, there’s no motivation. So you can’t get yourself up to get up to do some running and stuff. So some may say, just go for a walk, go for a run or something. Personally, if I actually wanted to do some sport I would only do my favourite

8  Ibid
9  Young Life and Times Survey, 2021
sport which is basketball. I don’t really like running and stuff.

Also, when you don’t have motivation, when you lose your motivation, for example, like myself, we can put so much weight on that also can lead up to mental health as well. So, you know what I mean, that they are all related to each other, you know?

And also, in socialising with people in basketball and also in college, (...) I am trying to learn English more and more every day. So when I’m not really socialising with people in college and basketball, so my English for example will really like get better or something every day and every, like For example, before when I was at college or something, I was talking to native people or people from here more, so my English was getting better.

But now I have like a little bit more problem, like especially when I do speak English for a long time or for days. I mean, because of the lockdown I only socialise with people on the phone, probably more from my country and I don’t talk as much as English before. So because of that, that will be another problem. When I can’t really speak English as good as before or when I don’t feel enough confidence that would be something that I can be worried about, nervous about. I mean when we get back to
normal life, you can’t really communicate with people as you could before, as well as before if you know (what) I mean?” (F5)

A number of young people talked about the importance of being able to get out of the house and to see friends to escape pressures or a difficult family life. Through written input, young carers explained that this meant continued social isolation, even during periods where others could get out, despite their need for a break from their home situation. This further impacted on feelings of loneliness, and poor mental health. (W1)

Many children and young people also had to go through periods of self-isolation having come into contact with someone with COVID-19, and this young person explained how this impacted on them:

“Self isolation has also been a difficult experience for many children and young people. Many students that attend my school, including myself, have had to self isolate at some point in the past year, with some having to self isolate for even longer. Self isolating was definitely detrimental to the mental health of young people. Being stuck inside for two weeks, unable to see your friends and only seeing your family from a distance or through a screen was difficult to cope with, and I personally underestimated how difficult I would find it.” (YLTS)

Impact on social skills and leading to social anxiety

A significant number of young people responding to the YLTS expressed concern that the isolation has impacted on their social skills and reported feeling very anxious about going out in public and having contact with people outside their households. Rather than looking forward to getting back to ‘normality’, many felt very stressed at the thought of hugging friends and family and being back in public settings. They reported struggling with relationships.

“Another problem that coronavirus created for young people is that I now find that my social skills are no longer as good as they were due to being locked up in my house for months on end without being able to go out and speak to people.” (YLTS)

“(The most difficult thing was) the stress of going back to a regular life full of normal activities because I personally have seen many of my friends find it too overwhelming.” (YLTS)

“I think it is very overwhelming being in crowds now. (...) Some of my family were over for my Daddy’s birthday like for a drive past and they were out in the back to get some cake, but I just felt it was like really overwhelming so I like stayed inside and being back at school is really hard because there’s loads of people around. I spent like the last year like, just me or my like immediate family, but now like we are back at school and there’s just loads and loads.” (F3)

Demonisation of young people gathering in public

Given the restrictions on meeting inside and in gardens, when restrictions eased many young people were relieved to be able to leave their homes and meet up with friends in public spaces. As we have seen, most programmes that would normally have been provided for them in their communities were not able to run, and many of the venues that opened were not suitable for children and young people, being licensed premises or costing too much money. A number of young people reported feeling judged by adults when they met friends in public, an important release after months of loneliness and stress.
“(The most difficult thing was) the impact it has on people’s headspace and being talked down to you when you’re out on a walk.” (YLTS)

“Young people were not able to get out like we usually would to see our friends without elderly or adults hating on us.” (YLTS)

The QUB report highlighted that for some, the consequences were more serious: ‘the impact on young people and their responses of, for example, meeting in groups in outdoor spaces such as at a local landmark, beach or park, which adult members of their community felt were unsuitable and unsafe. As a result, some young people may have found themselves in breach of social distancing guidelines and in direct conflict with the police.’

Young people felt that they had been scapegoated by government, stereotyped and discriminated against when meeting in public and a number talked about being blamed for spreading COVID-19.

“I feel as if most young people find it hard to go out and do anything when everything is closed but yet when we go out we are seen as scums and people who get into trouble when we are not.” (YLTS)

“Try and understand that blaming us for killing our grandparents and putting it in advertisements, will not work and in fact only has a more negative effect on the teens mental health, making them scared to leave the house.” (YLTS)

“We are also given all the blame for the spread of covid and were presented in the media as the people who are killing grandparents and loved ones, even those of us who are following the guidelines.” (YLTS)

Indeed, there has been substantial media reporting, and police reporting, of young people gathering in public, accusing young people of flouting the coronavirus regulations by gathering in public spaces and engaging in anti-social behaviour. Young people have responded to these incidents by accusing the Police and the media of trying to demonise their behaviour.

NICCY accepts that there has had to be restrictions on social gatherings during the COVID crisis and that the Police face difficult operational judgements enforcing the law. However, some of the media reporting of this issue does seem to have unfairly targeted children and young people for their behaviour while ignoring the fact that the vast majority of them comply with the law. There also seems to have been little attempt to consult with children and young people to ask them for their views and what might be done to help alleviate the problems they are facing. NICCY is concerned by reports of the Police handing out fines to young people at a time when incomes are already restricted as a result of the pandemic. (See also Chapter 9 on Youth Justice).

**Decision-making in relation to restrictions on play, leisure and social interaction**

It is clear from our engagement with children and young people that many felt that there was a lack of understanding among decision-makers about the impact of social isolation on them. Certainly, despite being less likely to become ill from COVID-19, or to spread the virus to others, they understood the

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importance of complying with restrictions in order to protect older and vulnerable people. However, as outlined in this chapter, this was at a cost to children and young people’s well-being, and it is important that there is recognition of this going forward.

“Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on everyone, I don’t think the government truly realises how harsh it was on us children/teenagers. These are the years where we interact and gain the most friendships and experience more things, but COVID-19 halted it rather suddenly.” (YLTS)

When we asked children and young people responding to the KLTS and YLTS about their advice to government, many responded that government needed to listen to them more.

“I think they should listen to children’s advice. It might sound weird but I think children should have their say even though we are younger.” (KLTS)

Some young people expressed difficulties understanding rules as they changed, as often these seemed inconsistent, for example being able to sit with friends in their bubble in school but not being able to meet outside.

Also, as restrictions were relaxed, the public messages mostly talked about hairdressers, bars and restaurants, but not about the kinds of places to which children and young people would want to go.

“I believe more emphasis should be taken to implement more plans and road maps for the reopening of children’s facilities and clubs. We are constantly reminded of when pubs are opening but never youth clubs, counselling centres or sports clubs for children.” (YLTS)

It is important that there is engagement with young people as society begins to open up again to prioritise the play and recreation activities for young people, which will be different from those for adults.

“The Government should ask young people about how they think public facilities should be opened up again, whether they would feel safe enough to use certain facilities so soon after they were reopened, which ones they want to see opened first, and how people could be encouraged to start using these facilities again.” (YLTS)

“The last two years of experience of our lives have been lost. Young people are too old for

“loss of socialisation that lockdown has caused as well as the detrimental impact on children and young people’s mental health. The government must take into consideration that it may be challenging for children and young people to transition back to life as we once knew it after being in lockdown for so long. Children and young people who had no access to devices for online learning during lockdown must be supported in order to catch up so their education does not suffer as a result of circumstances that were completely beyond their control. The government must understand that many young people have a lack of trust in them after their indecisiveness and failures to make decisions that affect the lives of young people, examples being the return back to school and exams.””

Young person, YLTS
always told me that they will always be the best years of your life, but not for us. We have had to sit in our bedroom every day wishing we could see our friends, go to that concert. But, no, we’re going to have to look back at this as adults and realise how the pandemic ruined the best years of our lives. I think we should get repaid from this by making more things available that is fun for teenagers. Mental health is also a really big issue. I lost a friend during the pandemic to suicide and so many other teenagers has been effected by it mentally. I am thankful that I have been able to stay strong during it but I just mostly hate the way that the funnest years of my life are down the drain.” (YLTS)

It is clear that greater priority needs to be given to children’s play, recreational and leisure activity as restrictions are relaxed, or indeed if we go back into another lockdown. The research data clearly shows that the decline in play, recreational and leisure activities has had a devastating impact on many children’s physical health and emotional wellbeing. There is a need for children to be able to gain access to these activities in order to maximise their overall development. We applaud the efforts of the youth sector in organising activities and events for young people during the lockdown period using online platforms. However, this is not a substitute for play, recreation and leisure activities over the longer term. The feedback from young people is that this is an area which has been overlooked during lockdown so this must be a primary focus for the Northern Ireland Executive over the coming months.

A financial package should be dedicated to overcoming the isolation experienced by children and young people, and a process of children’s budgeting and consultation used to determine how it is spent. There is a need to support the opening up of the venues and programmes that are in place for children and young people, and recognise the impact that

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“...fairs and things but too young for clubbing or festivals or larger events. Young people (are) sacrificing a lot and, at this age, our whole life is social, and we have no ways or means to change things. We’re all forgotten about because it’s parents or business people who don’t have our point of view (who are listened to).” (YLTS)

Children and young people would like to see their social places prioritised for opening: youth clubs, sports clubs, cinemas, gyms, open air concerts, activity centres, leisure centres. Parks should be kept open and children and young people facilitated to meet there without feeling demonised.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has drawn heavily on the voices of children and young people, to highlight the impact that the restrictions on their freedom to get together with friends and other young people, to play and participate in a range of recreational activities has had on their wellbeing and social development. It is vital that decision-makers are aware of this and that supporting children and young people to transition from these difficulties is a priority. There has been talk about extending school into the summer, or running catch-up programmes over summer months, but this ignores the great need that children and young people have for time to rest, play, hang out with friends, and take part in leisure, sporting, and cultural activities. These are not optional, or less important than other elements of young people’s lives, but foundational to their wellbeing and require the attention of political leaders as well as a commitment of resources.

“I think the most difficult thing was just not being able to do anything you want, not even being able to see people you want to see. I have lost touch with so much really close friends. The most important thing is that we are in our teenage years and my mum..." (YLTS)
social isolation has had on their wellbeing, whilst investing in increasing the play and recreational activities and programmes for children and young people. Several young people asked for new outdoor facilities, activities and events that are accessible to children and young people.

“There should be more facilities that can be very easily accessed by children. For example, there could be a few free football pitches, suitable for all weather, that have the actual nets on all year round.” (YLTS)

“The government should start to open more outdoor activities for all young people and develop places that are only for people 18 and below.” (YLTS)

Some young people asked for a particular focus on investing in centres where they can socialise, with an element of therapeutic support:

“…set up more youth clubs where young people can go and talk about their feelings, get away from the stress of home and school life and make new friends.” (YLTS)

Several young people emphasised the need to overcome barriers to their ability to socialise and participate in play and recreational activities, due to financial constraints, personal circumstances and limited access due to location. They asked that travel should be made free for children and young people, even on a temporary basis, to enable them to participate in activities and emphasised the importance of ensuring that those in rural areas and small towns were given particular consideration in the provision of new venues and programmes.

Some young people questioned the financial incentive scheme that will provide vouchers to households for use in the high street and suggest instead – or in addition – a reward system for young people. They proposed that this would provide free access, or vouchers or discounts for cinema tickets, concerts, waterparks, indoor play places, gym memberships, arts and craft activities, and driving lessons. One young person made the point that it would be them who would be paying off the debt incurred by government over the pandemic for decades to come, and so government should listen to them in relation to its investment in young people.
Recommendations

5.1 The Executive, Agencies, Councils and services should consult with young people as they make changes to restrictions and prioritise opening up the venues and services that are important to them including youth clubs, sports clubs, cinemas, gyms, open air concerts, activity centres, leisure centres. Parks should be kept open and children and young people facilitated to meet there safely, and without being demonised.

5.2 The Northern Ireland Executive should provide a financial package dedicated to overcoming the loss of play and recreational activities over the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social isolation experienced by children and young people. This should be used to increase the provision of facilities, programmes and events appropriate to different ages of children and young people up to 18, and a process of children’s budgeting and consultation used to determine how it is spent.

5.3 Consideration should be given to a ‘social incentive scheme’ for children and young people, providing them with free access, vouchers or discounts for cinema tickets, concerts, waterparks, indoor play places, gym memberships, arts and craft activities, and driving lessons. This could be similar to the ‘High Street Voucher Scheme’ due to be rolled out in NI.

5.4 When schools are open, every effort should be made to ensure that safe extra curricular activities like sports, orchestra, choir, clubs and drama start up again. Schools should be aware of the impact of social isolation and home schooling on anxiety and mental health and there should more emphasis on balancing schoolwork and wellbeing.

5.5 As restrictions are relaxed, there should be a focus on the key social occasions that have been missed by children and young people, both in terms of ensuring that these happen at the time but also, where possible, facilitating events and occasions that have been missed in lockdown. These include events marking the transitions between schools or leaving school, school events and school trips, sporting events and formals.
6. FAMILY LIFE AND ALTERNATIVE CARE
Introduction

The Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states: “…the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community”.

A number of articles are relevant to the role of the State in respect of family life. Article 18(2) makes clear that States have an obligation to provide appropriate assistance to families in assuming their child rearing responsibilities. This is particularly important given the potential impact of Covid on parental health and wellbeing and family income. Article 23 of the UNCRC underlines the importance of providing services to support parents caring for children with disabilities.

In its COVID Statement¹, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) notes that ‘… children living in institutions or deprived of their liberty … should at all times be allowed to maintain regular contact with their families’ and that ‘children in migration situations should not be detained nor separated from their parents if accompanied’. Children in alternative care or separated from their parents have protection under Articles 9, 18, 20 and 37c of the UNCRC.

This chapter examines the extent to which these rights were realised for children and young people during the pandemic. It assesses the impact of COVID-19 on family home life and alternative care, with a review of the specific issues and impacts affecting specific groups of children, young people and their families. This includes young carers, children in separated households, and children with family members in prison.

Families and Home Life

The pandemic has had undeniable impacts on children, young people, their families, and their home life. One of the most significant ways in which home life and family routine changed for many children and young people was as a result of school closures and the move to in-home learning for the majority of children and young people. Local research made clear that socio-economic background and other characteristics affected children’s home learning experience. For instance, a study by Stranmillis University College² found that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, parental education and employment status impacted on the extent of parental involvement in their child’s learning. Researchers at Ulster University³ found that parents of children with Free School Meals Entitlement were less confident supporting the learning of their children at home. This study also found that the parents of children with SEN and disability were likely to experience a range of challenges when home schooling their children.

The research conducted by QUB⁴ on behalf of NICCY emphasised the difficulties arising for families as specialised services and care for children with complex health needs and children with disabilities were effectively

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³ Ulster University (July 2020) Northern Ireland Parent Surveys: Experiences of Supporting Children’s Home Learning during COVID-19 UNESCO Centre, School of Education, Ulster University.
withdrawn for a number of months. This included therapies, special education, respite care and in many cases, carers coming into the family home. The impact on families was profound. Representatives from the disability sector spoke to the QUB researchers of parenting stress, anxiety, isolation, fear and exhaustion as the full weight of caring fell to them. Such challenges are consistent with the reports NICCY received about the experiences of parents/carers of children with SEN and disabilities. Many parents/carers informed us of the profoundly detrimental effects on the education, health and wellbeing of children with SEN and disabilities, as well as on their own health and wellbeing, as a result of school closures and the temporary suspension of pupil support services and other fundamental services. See Chapters 3 and 4 for further information.

In addition to the withdrawal, closure or pausing of formal supports for some children, evidence highlights the negative impact for many families of no longer having access to informal supports. The impacts on family services and supports were greatest for vulnerable groups and specialised services. Through the QUB research, voluntary community organisations supporting families who had newly arrived to Northern Ireland during the pandemic highlighted the additional stress for parents as intensive resettlement arrangements were disrupted. Many organisations, some of whom had previously worked primarily with children and/or young people, spoke to QUB of their responses now being framed by family relations and experiences. Youth and community organisations regularly delivered food and activity parcels with some noting that it was through one-to-one contact with young people that they identified family need. Others spoke of developing new relationships with parents which had led to parents contacting them directly for support with the social, emotional or educational needs of children.

The QUB research also highlighted the impacts of the pandemic on family and home life more generally, including: the impact on parent-child relations as a result of lockdown and the closure of children’s services; parental concerns for children/young people’s mental well-being, and sometimes their behaviour; and expectations regarding the home schooling and education of children. Therefore, it is evident that the pandemic affected families in a variety of ways.

“I think being kept apart from family and friends (was the hardest thing). It was really hard as my granny was diagnosed with dementia and we could not see her and my mummy was very sad as she was also caring for her. I feel young people were caught in the middle a lot between decisions about exams and I felt really sorry for our teachers who were trying their best. The government need to spend money (on) mental health services for children before things get so bad. Give us more teachers.”

Young person, YLTS

5 Ibid
Impact on children in separated households

The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on family life was particularly severe for some children whose parents lived in different households. While the UK Government clarified in March 2020 that children should maintain the contact arrangements that had been agreed prior to the pandemic, in practice, many parents were concerned that any movement between households could lead to the spread of COVID-19. Anecdotal evidence gathered by Family Mediation NI (FMNI) indicated that, for this reason, many children missed out on contact with one parent, often their fathers, for a prolonged period of time. Parenting NI echoed the additional challenges faced by separated fathers during the pandemic. It was noted that confusion caused by the conflicting advice regarding access to non-resident parents caused some ex-partners to withdraw contact with separated fathers. Challenges were compounded by the fact that family court proceedings were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

Moreover, as outlined by FMNI in an AgendaNI article in January 2021, the impact of lockdown and ongoing government-led restrictions had a devastating impact on separated families. The CEO of FMNI explained:

“Some parents had just separated before March 2020 or separated during Covid-19 restrictions and have been trapped in the same house for months. For many this has exacerbated their problems and it has been difficult to shield the children from the parental conflict and acrimony.”

The court service was not accessible for six months and is now working through a backlog of family cases, in the meantime the mental health of children and estranged parents is being impacted.”

In addition to the specific impacts facing separated families, it is evident that children from marginalised or vulnerable backgrounds were also severely impacted. NICCY received direct feedback from young carers and children with family members in prison which highlighted the specific challenges facing these young people and their families during the pandemic, as reflected in the following paragraphs.

Young Carers

Qualitative feedback provided by young carers to NICCY highlighted how COVID-19 impacted on their caring role. They spoke about increased social isolation and expressed anxiety about a return to normal life, including in the context of where a parent or sibling may be shielding. The young people said that they missed social activities with their friends and felt lonely. There was reference to an increase in caring responsibilities over the course of lockdown. There was also reflection from young people that they felt low because of the pandemic and issues that had arisen around how COVID-19 had impacted on their general mental health.

“Lockdown is an anxious time but I’m looking forward to getting back to some sort of normal” (W1)

“I feel like a lot of young people isolate themselves, especially young carers, like most of my friends who are young carers have just sort of isolated themselves” (W1)

7 Carson, H., (January 2021), Agenda NI article: ‘Helping separated parents reach agreement’.
Children with family members in prison

NICCY also engaged the views and experiences of children and young people with family members in prison. Several mentioned that they missed visiting parents or family members in prison, and noted that virtual contact was not the same as face-to-face interaction. Some mentioned that zoom or telephone contact was reduced compared with the length of usual face-to-face visits. Others reflected on the impact of reduced contact on their relationships with family members in prison, whilst some highlighted a reduction in access to support services for children of family members in prison:

“I miss going up to see my Dad on visits to the prison – I get 1 zoom call a week for about 30 mins whereas I would have had an hour face to face.” (W3)

“I miss going up to see my uncle in prison. Zoom calls are not as good as face to face visits.” (W3)

“I missed going to groups with other young people who have a family member in custody as they understand how I feel. I also missed going for walks with my support worker.” (W3)

Some queried why mitigations had not been put in place to enable sustained face-to-face visits. For instance, one young person said he would be happy to take a COVID test before a visit; another queried why socially distanced visits had not been enabled. Others recommended that, coming out of the pandemic, improved visitation access was required.

“If prisons had have allowed visits to stay open so I could see my dad – I would have been happy to take a test each time before I seen him.” (W3)

“If they had have put socially distanced visits in place at least I could have seen my brother face to face.” (W3)

In summer 2021, it was announced that contact during prison visits between parents and children under 11 would resume from the 19th July 2021. Whilst welcome, it is regretful that the resumption of face-to-face contact between children and parents was not enabled sooner, not least given the importance of family engagement in maintaining relationships and supporting rehabilitation. Going forward it's critical that provisions are made to ensure that there is no further disruption to contact between children and young people and their family members, both in the recovery period and in the case of future emergency situations.

Young People in Alternative Care

There is much evidence of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people in care and secure care. It is notable that, as of 28 June 2021, there were 3,545 children in care, and that recent data has reflected the highest recorded numbers of children in care since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

During focus groups with young people in alternative care, NICCY heard powerful testimony from young people about the difficulties arising from restrictions on face-to-face contact with family and professionals. Young people in secure care said that visiting had been curtailed because of COVID-19 and that zoom calls were not as good as face-to-face visits. They said it was sometimes

difficult to maintain contact virtually as the IT equipment was broken or it did not work properly. Some reported problems trying to contact social workers and commented that the lack of contact made it difficult for them to build relationships. They said that COVID-19 had made things more difficult for young people coming into secure care as they had to isolate when they arrived.

“Like for my first week here, it took nearly a week and a half to get through to my social worker.” (F6)

“No, no contact at all, it’s over phone and Zoom, there’s no face to face whatsoever like contact.” (F6)

“It’s a bit sh** like to be fair, well it’s doable but it’s still sh** all together because it’s better being face to face. I like our new social worker and I’ve seen her once. They did let her in after all, just to meet me for the first time but other than that I haven’t seen her, I’ve just talked to her on the phone so I don’t really know her that well.” (F6)

Care experienced young people reported similar issues, with some noting a lack of engagement from social workers. Some of the young people said they missed seeing their parents and would like to have more time with them. The young people said that children in care often fall through the gaps in service provision and COVID-19 had exacerbated the situation even further. Young people also highlighted disparities in the operation of COVID-19 restrictions on arrangements for visiting and outings across different parts of the care system. Chapter 7 ‘Safeguarding’ further considers the impact of a lack of contact with social workers and other professionals.

“I think it maybe depends for different people, some people had different experiences obviously, different Trusts and different social workers, but I’ve heard quite a few people say they weren’t being contacted as much as they usually were or they weren’t being notified about stuff as much. There was like a lag in information, like a period where they would hear nothing.” (F3)
The research conducted by QUB\textsuperscript{10} on behalf of NICCY found evidence to corroborate the feedback provided by the young people with regards limited visitation and access to family members, social workers and other professionals. The QUB research findings highlighted that, for children in custody and secure care, there was an immediate impact on direct/in-person contact with their family. During the first period of lockdown, direct contact with the family was withdrawn in the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) and Beechcroft and replaced with phone calls and video-conferencing. A number of NGOs noted that for children in care, the guidance regarding family visits and family contact was ‘complicated’. It was reported that safeguarding practices were not consistent across Trusts, and family bubbling arrangements were diverse. This created much anxiety for children who, at least initially, felt they could not have direct family contact.

Further research\textsuperscript{11} published by VOYPIC and Queen’s University Belfast in February 2021, reviewed the experiences of young people leaving care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five key themes emerged from the study, which further reflect the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 response on young people in care, including with regards to disrupted relationships and limitations on access to professional support:

- \textbf{Disruption:} This included disruption to family relationships and social contacts, changes to education and employment, cancelled international trips and delays to the delivery of treatment or services. The study found that key milestones such as the end of education were not recognised or celebrated. Young people who were leaving care faced complex challenges moving into new living arrangements and had less access to support during this time;
- \textbf{Continuities:} Some young people noted they were socially isolated before the pandemic so little had changed;
- \textbf{Individual Responses:} The study found most young people understood and complied with the lockdown restrictions put in place. They developed a range of coping strategies to alleviate the boredom and anxiety including games, exercise and other activities;
- \textbf{Mental Health and Wellbeing:} Many of the young people said the pandemic had a negative impact on their emotional health and wellbeing. A number spoke about experiencing depression, anxiety and social isolation;
- \textbf{Access to Professional Support:} Young people had mixed reactions to the support provided by their social workers and other key workers. Many appreciated their social workers staying in touch during very difficult circumstances. Most note that there needed to be a transition from face-to-face to virtual contact. However, some disappointment was expressed at the lack of contact from social workers.

\textbf{Impact of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020}

Any negative consequences of the pandemic for children and young people in care must be considered in the context of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

\textsuperscript{10} Corr et al (2021) Op Cit

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020\textsuperscript{12} which were introduced by the Department of Health in order to reduce pressure on statutory services through the dilution of statutory obligations across a wide range of areas affecting children. The areas affected included standards for placing children in foster, emergency and immediate placements; and the frequency and methods used in reviewing the care of children in foster, residential and secure care or who have been, or are awaiting, placement for adoption.

NICCY wholly accepts the need for the Department to undertake emergency planning to ensure that child protection and social care arrangements can continue to operate during and following on from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as NICCY consistently expressed throughout the pandemic, these emergency measures must only be introduced as a last resort given that they weaken statutory obligations to protect and support vulnerable children.

The Departmental planning response was undertaken at a point when the breadth and depth of the crisis was still unknown and feared to be within the parameters of worse case modelling. While the Department did consult NICCY and make some modifications to the Regulations and Guidance following this, NICCY is of the view that the Regulations should not have been used until a more robust threshold for establishing the need for such use was in place and a suitably rigorous assessment and reporting process to monitor this was developed.

On the 6 May 2021, it was announced that the Ministerial decision had been taken not to extend the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The Department of Health made clear that the Regulations would fall on 7 May 2021 and would not be replaced with new Regulations. NICCY warmly welcomed this decision, and the fact that it was informed by direct engagement with children and young people as well as the advice of the Commissioner and others with regards the negative impact of the Regulations on children and carers.

\begin{quote}
“Provide more care for the young people in difficult situations at home, whether that be due to financial situation or domestic abuse. Children and young people need to be taken better care of, by perhaps implementing a higher unemployment wage for parents who struggled to provide during these times, or set up more organizations that can provide food, access to the internet and other things to these families, as well as a protective service which ensures children who are stuck in an abusive home are safe.”

Young person, YLTS
\end{quote}

During the period when the emergency legislation was in place, Monitoring Reports were produced by the Department of Health. These reports highlighted significant variation in practice and compliance with timeframes across HSCTs. NICCY is of the view that such variation was not solely related to the pandemic and that this exercise highlighted pre-existing issues which require further exploration. It is critical that the Department investigate these issues further with a view to

\textsuperscript{12} Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020: \url{www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/78/contents/made}
ensuring greater consistency in practice and compliance with timeframes across HSCTs.

NICCY is mindful that, as current lockdown measures are eased further, statutory services will experience a significant increase in referrals and demand, including in relation to child protection and children in need cases. In this prolonged period of social distancing and isolation not all family homes are safe places for children. The Government must therefore ensure that children who are both living in family environments and who are in the care of, or are accommodated by, the state are visible and their voices are heard. At a time of emergency, it is a priority that our most vulnerable children and young people are protected by the highest standards and most robust statutory safeguards.

**Conclusion**

The evidence shows that successive lockdown arrangements have had a profound impact on the lives of children and young people and their families. The move to remote learning at home and the loss of many social outlets have contributed to family stress and anxiety. Children and young people of separating or separated parents often experienced a reduction in contact with family members living outside of their household, as did children with family members in prison. Families of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, including those with disabilities and complex health needs, were profoundly affected. The emergency legislation for those in care was introduced without sufficient safeguards, and the reports which emerged as a result highlighted inconsistencies and inequities within the care system.

It is also clear that those young people in care and secure care were not supported as well as they might be in terms of access to professional support and services. Many saw a significant reduction in face-to-face contact with families, social workers, and other professionals, with detrimental consequences in terms of heightened isolation, stress, and reduced wellbeing.

The Northern Ireland Executive need to take urgent and decisive action to address these issues with a view to ensuring young people and their families receive the support they need now and into the future. It should be noted that there is alignment between the recommendations summarised on the next page and in Chapter 7 ‘Safeguarding’. It will only be by progressing all recommendations that the full protection of children’s, young people’s and families’ rights will be realised.
Recommendations

6.1 The Department of Health’s Family and Parenting Support Strategy should comprehensively consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, young people, their parents and carers, and wider families. It must set out a series of mitigations and additional provisions to address any adverse impacts on family and home life.

6.2 Any barriers to maintaining contact between children and family members, including e.g. where parents are separated or family members are in prison, must be identified and provisions made to ensure that there is no further disruption to contact.

6.3 The full provision of respite services must be available to families of children with disabilities and complex needs both in the recovery period and in any future emergency situations.

6.4 The Department of Health should explore the issues that resulted in the inconsistent use of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, across different areas of social care and different HSCTs, in order to ensure greater consistency in practice and compliance with timeframes across HSCTs in Northern Ireland.

“Make things cheaper everything is more expensive now a days because of COVID and familys have less money because there trying to buy stuff to stay safe.”
Young person, YLTS

“I’d say that quite a few people had experienced the loss of a family member due to corona which is the most horrible thing to have to go through as a child or young person.”
Young person, YLTS
7. SAFEGUARDING
**Introduction**

It is important to acknowledge that the range of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) articles considered under safeguarding comprise the most fundamental rights that should be afforded to all children and young people in Northern Ireland – right to life and protection from all forms of harm, abuse, exploitation and violence and to recovery and rehabilitation from such harm. This includes: Article 6 on the inherent right of the child to life, survival and development to the maximum extent; Article 19 which provides protection from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse; Articles 34, 35 and 36 which further set out State party obligations to safeguard children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, abduction, sale or trafficking and all other forms of exploitation which are prejudicial to the child; Article 32 which provides protection from all forms of economic exploitation; Article 33 which includes specific safeguards to prevent the use of children in the illicit production and trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances; and Article 37 which provides that no child should be subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 39, in turn, establishes State party obligations to ensure that all appropriate measures are in place to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse, torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. There are a number of UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comments which relate to the above articles, but the most relevant may be General Comment 13 on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence.¹ This provides detailed guidance on the steps which should be taken by governments to realise children’s protection rights and highlights that a rights-based approach requires a paradigm shift towards respecting and promoting the human dignity and integrity of children as rights-bearing individuals rather than perceiving them primarily as ‘victims’. In 2016, the Committee’s Concluding Observations set out a wide range of recommendations to the UK and devolved Governments in order to better fulfil children’s rights across the Convention articles previously highlighted.² This included calls to prohibit the use of corporal or physical punishment in the family; to strengthen data collection and recording in relation to violence, abuse and neglect; increase the number of social workers and strengthen their capacity to address violence against children; ensure the recommendations of the Marshall (or Independent) Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation are implemented; and further develop comprehensive support services for children who are at risk of or have been subject to violence, abuse and exploitation.

It is often also in the context of protection that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) draws particular attention to the importance of preserving and realising the rights of more vulnerable groups of children such as migrant, asylum seeking and refugee children and children living in alternative

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¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence. Available at: [Refworld](https://www.refworld.org/en/pdf/3/40/4/34e31abe1.pdf) | General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence

care and this can be seen in United Nations (UN) guidance to state parties during the COVID-19 pandemic. As set out by the UN, this is not simply confined to concerns about children and families experiencing COVID-19 infection and illness but also the impact of the measures taken to suppress and control the pandemic on children, with specific reference to physical distancing, lockdown, restrictions of movement and increased surveillance with 60% of children worldwide living in a lockdown or state emergency by April 2020.  

The UN also notes unease regarding the long-term impact of the pandemic on the broader realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals and children’s rights.

This discussion will consider these concerns in the context of information which is available at the time of writing regarding children and families, reflecting on children’s social care data and published research in Northern Ireland and the UK and in drawing on the experiences and views of professionals and children as provided to NICCY’s commissioned research undertaken by QUB and also through our direct engagement with children and young people during focus groups which have informed our recommendations.

In its April 2020 statement, the Committee in highlighting its concern about the situation of children across the globe and particularly in areas which were subject to declared states of emergencies and mandatory lockdowns noted that in responding to the pandemic, governments must define “core child protection services as essential and ensure that they remain functioning and available, including home visits when necessary…”.

While it is very positive that the vast majority of children and young people (91%) taking part in NICCY’s commissioned Kids Life and Times Survey and Young Life and Times Survey reported that they felt safe at home during the pandemic it is also important to recognise that violence by caregivers is the most common form of violence experienced by children. The Committee has been acutely aware of the potential risk from increased confinement to home for children for whom this is not a place of safety or security and where they may witness or directly experience violence and abuse at a time of reduced contact with professionals and others and minimal visibility outside of their immediate living environments.

In the first phase of the pandemic, at 31 March 2020, 22,414 children in Northern Ireland were known to social care services as a child in need, 3,838 were in the care of Health and Social Care Trusts and 2,298 children were placed on the Child Protection Register. Across the UK, Northern Ireland has the highest rate per 10,000 of children placed on the Child Protection Register with the majority of registrations being due to physical abuse, neglect or a combination of both. It is also important to remember that many more children not placed on the Register live in homes affected by domestic abuse and other forms of violence as well as in households where parental alcohol and substance use


6 KLTs and YLTS

or parental mental ill health may be a significant factor.

**COVID-19 and safeguarding**

NICCY has repeatedly acknowledged the importance of addressing the public health crisis as swiftly and effectively as possible and has recognised that in such circumstances the emergency response to public health concerns is rightly prioritised. However, the Commissioner has been clear that, in line with human rights standards, any dilution, modification or lessening of protection standards for children and young people must operate only as a last resort, for the shortest time possible and must be subject to robust reporting and scrutiny. We also acknowledge the severe pressures placed on health and social care systems and staff throughout this unprecedented period. Navigating how best to protect children while complying with rapidly developing public health guidance to minimise risk of infection and illness to children, their carers and staff has not been a straightforward task. As articulated by a participant in research undertaken by QUB on behalf of NICCY:

“We didn’t really know what we were dealing with, we didn’t really know what the impact was going to be, we were all kind of finding our way.”

In the context of safeguarding, this includes addressing the challenges of ensuring that, at times without face to face contact, children were not at risk, were physically safe and unharmed, had access to devices for communication, were free and confident to speak openly during telephone or video calls, that abusers were not present, that safety plans were robust while taking account of restrictions and, importantly, that meaningful relationships with vulnerable children were developed and maintained throughout.

As the health crisis developed and schools, youth and community services, sporting clubs and the full range of face to face services and supports closed and stay at home regulations came into force, children’s social care statistics began to illustrate the lack of visibility of vulnerable children with referral rates in general and child protection referrals in particular becoming more variable, with significant drops during periods of fuller lockdown. However, over this period the numbers of children in Northern Ireland placed on the Child Protection Register have remained fairly steady (although there has been some decrease across the November 2020 to end April 2021 period) as have numbers of children in care (although interestingly here, some increases can be seen in the period from November 2020 to the end of April 2021).

In focusing on referrals, a similar pattern of reductions in referrals at times of heightened restrictions has been repeated across the UK and research undertaken elsewhere in the UK has suggested that drops in referral rates to child protection specialist services illustrate how other agencies, communities and individuals were not able to bridge the safeguarding gap which lockdowns created.

In contrast to this, reported incidents of

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11 Ibid
12 Garstang J. et al (2020) https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/9/e042867
domestic violence and abuse during the first lockdown increased in Northern Ireland\(^\text{13}\) and elsewhere, and in discussions with NICCY one specialist service highlighted specific concerns about increases in domestic abuse affecting the Traveller community, noting the particular impact of measures, such as, travel restrictions on this group and the need for ongoing face to face interactions between services and children and families (F10). It is notable that published work in England raises concern that increased reporting of domestic abuse has not been accompanied by equivalent referrals seeking support for children in affected households.\(^\text{14}\)

In its guidance to State Parties, the UN encouraged governments to raise awareness of safeguarding and children’s vulnerabilities including through TV, radio and online. In Northern Ireland officials sought to encourage reporting of child protection concerns through the media and specialist helplines were promoted. The Department of Health also provided NICCY with monitoring information concerning implementation of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modifications) Regulations (2020), although these related more widely to statutory obligations regarding children in care.

In the study undertaken by QUB\(^\text{15}\) on behalf of NICCY, participants from across statutory, voluntary and community sectors all expressed serious concern about the safety of children and young people during the pandemic. In addition to noting concerns relating to trends in referrals and reporting, participants highlighted workforce pressures with staff and services who play a key role in safeguarding, such as health visiting, being redirected elsewhere within the health system and significant reductions in workforce availability due to COVID-19 related absence at key points in the pandemic. We note that health and social care in Northern Ireland operates with persistent challenges in relation to absence rates and vacant posts leaving services at greater vulnerability when under any additional pressures.

NICCY is mindful that there is little Northern Ireland reporting to date which provides a more qualitative insight into how key professionals, such as social workers, managed the impact of the crisis while protecting children. However, during engagement with professionals, QUB noted participants expressing concern that, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there had been a shift from early intervention and prevention support to crisis intervention responses.\(^\text{16}\) In discussion with NICCY, one service noted concern that for groups already facing a range of barriers to accessing services, such as families from the Roma community, changes to services and interventions during the pandemic created additional barriers to securing support (F9). Further to this, a UK wide survey of social workers found that 77.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that working under lockdown restrictions had increased their concerns about their capacity to safeguard and protect children and adults.\(^\text{17}\)

Within this broader context, it is important to reflect that children at risk of harm during the pandemic were often without access to their usual formal and informal support networks, to physical contact with trusted or protective


\(^{16}\) Ibid

\(^{17}\) BASW (2021) [https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/social-work-during-covid-19-pandemic-initial-findings](https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/social-work-during-covid-19-pandemic-initial-findings)
adults as well as peers, while being confined in households that were often subject to greater degrees of pressure, stress and volatility. In viewing the pandemic through a child protection lens, the restrictions can be understood as providing greater opportunity for abusers to exert control over and to harm children and to restrict the involvement of others in their lives. ChildLine has highlighted that they have received a significant increase in contacts from children about a wide range of safeguarding concerns in their home environments during the pandemic, including the increased use of physical punishment, exposure to domestic abuse and coercive control, the impact of increased parental use of alcohol as well as children being subject to physical and sexual abuse.\(^\text{18}\)

NICCY notes that while schools were opened during lockdown restrictions for vulnerable children (in order to ensure ongoing face to face contact with trusted professionals as well as supporting learning), at the time of writing, information in the public domain indicates very low levels of attendance during the first lockdown period\(^\text{19}\) and while officials have stated that attendance rates were higher during the second full lockdown\(^\text{20}\) detailed figures are not yet available. We also note that a Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People was issued in December 2020 to provide clear guidance to schools and establish a multiagency process with oversight to better ensure vulnerable children were being properly identified and supported to attend school during the second lockdown as further discussed in chapter 4 on education.

Understanding that safety and stability for children, whether or not they are subject to formal child protection measures, is often embedded across a full range of daily and weekly routines, contacts and activities, of which schools are one vital element, and many of which will have been removed or significantly modified during the pandemic is critically important. As described by one participant in the QUB research:

> “But that whole family support is not just about social workers going out to visit the child, or even giving them a wee bit of daycare or whatever. This is about their time at school, their time in the youth club, their time in the, wherever, the football team, whatever, and all those eyes are on. Once those eyes no longer look at all those children they all become vulnerable. So I think that that’s the big thing…” \(^\text{21}\)

Indeed, the pandemic and associated public health measures and restrictions may have not only have led to children spending increased time in unsafe environments and with abusers but also exposed them to new sources of harm, such as, during the mass move to the digital world for remote learning, for connection with family and friends and to access information and support, in turn risking greater exposure to inappropriate and harmful content as well as grooming and online abuse.\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^{22}\) NIA Health Committee (2021) [http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-25383.pdf](http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-25383.pdf)


It has also been reported that young people have found themselves facing the trauma of past abuse and exploitation as the impact of this has become more acute during the isolation of the lockdown periods.23

**Vulnerable groups**

Taking action to protect children whose vulnerability is further increased by the circumstances of the pandemic was also highlighted by the Committee, noting that governments must ensure the non-discrimination of children and vulnerable groups, such as children subject to immigration control or those in detention or secure care, and should also seek to apply targeted measures to ensure they are protected.24 For example, as discussed in chapter 6 addressing family life and alternative care, children with experience of care and secure care have given powerful testimony to NICCY on the impact of not being able to have in person contact with social workers and other professionals and visits with family members, particularly at times of both family celebrations and family illness. Young people have also highlighted disparities in the operation of COVID-19 restrictions on arrangements for visiting and outings across different parts of the care system.

On the lack of face to face contact with social workers and other professionals:

“Like that just, like that makes it hard. Your journey in here like a whole lot, ten times worse for yourself.” (F6)

“Yes, it definitely is because you’re not getting to see them as much as you want to see them. You’re not getting time with them to build up those bonds that you have. Even when you’re in the community and have built up the relationships with them it just goes when you’re in here, because you don’t get to see them, they mainly don’t answer their phones. Zoom call, if they can’t answer their phone, they’re definitely not answering a Zoom call, so it’s just harder.” (F6)

“… but young people in care really do fall through the gaps sometimes of service provisions and stuff and I feel like that during Covid that has had the possibility to happen even more and you know it’s people’s lives and it’s actually young people and we are at an important stage of our lives and if our social workers not contacting us or not keeping up with us and lets us kind of fall off, (then this) could ruin our whole lives and it’s important to kind of highlight that …” (F3)

For instance, in hearing from young people subject to immigration control, the impact of the pandemic on feelings of isolation and stress and the challenges caused by a lack of social and other activities and visits was evident. Concerns were expressed about reductions in face to face contact with key professionals, such as social workers and legal representatives, including in relation to preparing for key events such as asylum interviews with the Home Office. Young people’s experiences also highlighted the particular difficulties for separated and asylum-seeking children who may have arrived in Northern Ireland just prior to, or during, the pandemic period and who did not have pre-existing friendship networks, school or college connections or sporting or faith community links to draw on. As noted earlier, it is across this full range of relationships,

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contacts and activities that children’s protection is embedded.

In further exploring the UN’s stated concerns regarding children in precarious or vulnerable situations during the pandemic, it is important to remember that this includes reference to the particular risks that children in conflict settings are subject to – an issue which has been brought into sharp focus in Northern Ireland in recent months. NICCY firmly locates the use of children and young people in unrest and disturbances during this period as child exploitation and, along with other activities associated with paramilitary and criminal gangs, including threats and assaults against children, the development of debt arrangements and the recruitment of children into groups and gangs, highlights that this should be responded to as safeguarding matter. The role of the pandemic and associated restrictions in leading to children in communities becoming more vulnerable to such exploitation should be recognised.

In their advice to governments on responding to the pandemic, the UN has been clear that poorly planned or executed measures to contain COVID-19 “present additional risks to children’s safety and the violation of their rights, especially when measures to care for the most vulnerable are not also enacted.”25 The examples noted above illustrate the complex and myriad ways in which measures to safeguard children and young people must take full account of the exposure to risk and harm this period has placed vulnerable children in.

Across children’s social care the immediate response to the pandemic took the form of Surge Planning and use of a regional Action Card to guide statutory responses alongside sector specific guidance, such as on the use of PPE and on childcare, supported living and adoption services. This was accompanied by a Vulnerable Children and Young People Plan26, brought forward by the Northern Ireland Executive and developed by the departments of Health, Education, Justice, Economy and Communities. It is important to reflect that the Plan sought to embed a cross-departmental and multi-agency approach and to establish a broad definition of children who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19. NICCY welcomed the inclusion in the definition of children known to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, those attending Education Other Than At School, children in families with No Recourse to Public Funds and children in need of support who were not known to statutory services as well as children already in receipt of statutory support.

While the development of the Plan and the close contact between the Department of Health, Health and Social Care Board and Trusts throughout this period were clearly very positive, there are a number of concerns regarding the effectiveness of the Plan to date. In NICCY’s advice,27 the need to ensure a robust child rights underpinning to the Plan along with a clearer focus on outcomes for children and identification of monitoring data was highlighted. Following on from this, we note that activity reports shared with NICCY by the Education Authority, while providing useful information on service provision, do not directly relate to the identified groups of children, risks or “actions/possible actions” set out in the Plan. NICCY has also highlighted concern about the lack of detail regarding the “actions/

possible actions” associated with the Plan, for example, noting the lack of clarity about the interventions that would be put in place when vulnerable children did not attend school or the lack of concrete measures to be taken to prevent the exploitation of children in the context of paramilitarism, organised crime and criminality. Indeed, this lack of detail led NICCY to consider that a full assessment of the Plan could not be given and its effectiveness is yet to be reported against with officials noting that around 50% of respondents to the consultation were concerned about the actions and responses set out in the document.28

On 30 June the Department of Health announced that learning from the consultation will be used to inform existing strategy development and services planning, including the Children and Young People’s Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy. It also indicated that, rather than revising and continuing to deliver through the COVID-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People’s Plan, delivery for vulnerable children and young people, including in relation to needs created or exacerbated by COVID-19, would be taken forward through the development and implementation of these strategies.29

Conclusion

In times of unprecedented and acute crisis, such as that represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that children subject to and at risk of harm, abuse and exploitation are effectively safeguarded and that the services and professionals who hold statutory safeguarding duties are able to discharge them effectively.30 It is positive that research undertaken by QUB noted that practitioners identified that learning from the first lockdown period was incorporated into later responses to safeguarding children, but the concerns they have expressed about both potential increases in referrals and demand for services and the risks of staff burnout should inform plans for recovery across children’s social care.31

Critically, plans for rebuilding must also be shaped by a full understanding of the impact of experiences of abuse and violence during the pandemic on children as well as their direct experiences of remote or modified contact and services during this time and their recommendations for change going forward. Following on from this, NICCY warmly welcomes that the Department of Health’s decision not to seek further extension of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus)
(Temporary Modifications) Regulations (2020) was informed by direct engagement with children and young people as well as the advice of the Commissioner and others.32

Indeed, the UN’s guidance to governments is helpful in highlighting the importance of ensuring that children and young people are actively involved in processes to respond to the emergency and to transition out of lockdown measures and that the full restoration of services for children is prioritised, with a particular focus on ensuring they are child centred and provide equity of access.33

The guidance also reflects on the opportunities presented by the pandemic to build more resilient and adaptable service delivery systems that can better withstand any future crisis and, drawing on the experiences and views of children and young people, this should shape the next stages of recovery in health and social care in Northern Ireland.

**Recommendations**

7.1 Government and statutory agencies must ensure that COVID-19 restrictions are measures of last resort and implemented consistently and equitably across children’s social care, with particular reference to visits and outings in all care settings.

7.2 There should be a clear government commitment to ensure face-to-face contact with children where there are safeguarding concerns or where children are cared for by the State at all times. Any pauses in this should be in the most limited of circumstances, when absolutely necessary, for the shortest time possible and would require more stringent regulatory and monitoring arrangements than have been in place in the 2020-21 period.

7.3 A thorough and ongoing assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on safeguarding should be undertaken. The experiences and views of children and young people as well as those who care for them and practitioners should directly inform this and the recovery and rebuilding of children’s social care.

7.4 The Children and Young People’s Strategy (CYPS) and its Delivery Plan should be informed by the feedback on the consultation on the Vulnerable Children and Young People’s Plan and adapted as necessary to provide a robust framework for safeguarding children during the current continuing uncertainty and in any future crisis.

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32 DoH (2021) Consultation on proposals to extend modifications to children’s social care regulations | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)

8. ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND PARTICIPATION
Introduction

“After the Covid-19 crisis comes to an end, will you take the views of young people more seriously after the sacrifices and contributions we have made throughout it?”

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken on their behalf. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) has identified Article 12 as one of the four general principles of the Convention. Reflecting on the importance of Article 12, the Committee’s General Comment reinforced that the right to have a say does not cease in situations of crisis or in their aftermath.

Children and young people have the right to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information (Article 13) as long as the information is not damaging to them or others. Articles 14 (Freedom of thought, conscience and religion), 15 (Freedom of association) and 17 (Access to information; mass media) also relate to their right to have a say in decisions affecting them.

This is reflected in the Committee’s statement on the impact of COVID-19 on children’s rights (April, 2020). The Committee warned of the serious physical, emotional and psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and called on countries to ensure protection for the rights of children. With regard to children and young people’s participation, paragraphs 10 and 11 note the importance of disseminating accurate information about COVID-19 and underlines the need to provide opportunities for children’s views to be heard and taken into decision-making processes related to the pandemic. The Committee called on States to:

“Disseminate accurate information about COVID-19 and how to prevent infection using language and formats that are child-friendly and accessible to all children including children with disabilities, migrant children and children with limited access to the Internet.”

And

“Provide opportunities for children’s views to be heard and taken into account in decision-making processes on the pandemic. Children should understand what is happening and feel that they are taking part in the decisions that are being made in response to the pandemic.”

The Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2016, made a series of recommendations relating to participation including to:

1. Establish structures for the active and meaningful participation of children and give due weight to their views in designing laws, policies, programmes and services at the local and national level, including in relation to discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, harmful practices, alternative care, sexual and reproductive education, leisure and play. Particular

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1 Young person’s question - Voices in and out of Lockdown briefing report.doc (niyf.org)
2 Para 125; UN Committee GENERAL COMMENT No. 12 (2009) The right of the child to be heard, UN CommRC
4 UN Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (2016)
attention should be paid to involving younger children and children in vulnerable situations, such as children with disabilities.

2. Ensure that children are not only heard but also listened to and their views given due weight by all professionals working with children.

In these unprecedented times when the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closing down of many of the normal processes of engagement – schools, youth organisations and clubs, youth councils and youth fora all being closed - it was more vital than ever to be creative, to reach out and hear the voice of children and young people.

It was essential to give young people time and space to raise their voices and also for those in charge to hear them and respond to them. Remote engagement platforms quickly became accessible to many as an -albeit limited- mechanism for providing information and hearing from children and young people. It does, however, need to be noted that many young people did not have access to either the appropriate devices or the appropriate network coverage.

Although in draft form at the time of the first COVID-19 lockdown, the subsequently signed off Executive’s Children and Young people Strategy (CYPS), 2020-30 highlighted:

“Working together means…. Government Departments actively listening to the voice of children and young people, parents and guardians and stakeholders when considering children and young people’s issues.”

In fulfilling NICCY’s legislative remit to encourage children and young people to participate, our participation workstream is integrated throughout the organisation. This is viewed as an essential and indeed positive opportunity to inform legislation, strategies, policies and services which ensure the promotion of the rights of all children and young people in Northern Ireland. Strategically, we advise and support many aspects of government to develop policies and structures to support the involvement of children and young people in decisions that affect them.

We enhance awareness of the UNCRC, Children and Young People’s Rights and NICCY’s work/role with key stakeholders, including parents, guardians and carers; professionals and practitioners; political representatives; media and the general public.

In addition, to inform this report, NICCY requested from each Government Department and their associated agencies feedback on how they informed children and young people about the issues pertaining to COVID-19; how this information was disseminated and how they engaged directly with children and young people to gather their views on the issues they were facing.

This Chapter explores how effectively government met children’s rights to accurate information and listened to children in decision-making processes.

Children and Young People’s Access to Information

The rapid arrival of the first lockdown was difficult for many, especially for children and young people with the closure of schools and associated social restrictions. It quickly became clear that there was a wide range of information available in various forms and formats, some understandable but much very confusing and inaccessible to children and young people.

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5  Pg. 15, Children and Young People’s Strategy, 2020-30, DENI
6  See Appendix 2 for those Departments that returned feedback.
In response, NICCY developed a COVID-19 Information Hub\(^7\) with resources and information for children and young people and their parents. The Hub hosted messages from the Commissioner and collated and shared COVID-19 related information on children and young people’s education, their health (mental and physical); for care experienced children, etc., and shared it widely. The pages were updated with new information as it became available.

In the 12 months following the first lockdown, an ongoing engagement between NICCY, the NICCY Youth Panel and The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) was established. Not only did this provide the youth panel with up to date exam and assessment information, these meetings also provided CCEA with vital feedback on their published or about to be published information for students. These enabled CCEA to review their FAQ section on their website and update/ revise as appropriate following feedback from the Youth Panel.

As highlighted in the QUB Report, the initial responses from the key decision-making agencies and departments with regards to disseminating information focused on the general public health message rather than specific messages in specific formats aimed at children and young people. The early tranche of information was not specifically in a child friendly format and it wasn’t until later stages that information was translated into more appropriate languages and circulated in more appropriate formats.

Positively, the resources identified within NICCY’s Information Hub reflected the transition from general public health information to the provision of children and young people focussed information.

The QUB Report indicated the important role of children and young people’s NGOs and the media in pushing out information to children and young people, their parents, guardians and carers. One mental health representative explained:

“They translated things and … within a few weeks there was a whole body of stuff online that we could point parents to … all the parenting experts were coming on through social media, talking about this and how to … help children understand it.”\(^8\)

Following on from the initial sharing of information to the wider population, feedback received from Departments indicated a variety of ways in which they, and their Arms Length Bodies (ALBs), disseminated or supported the dissemination of information about COVID-19 to children and young people.

Almost every Department and/or its associated agencies used social media to reach out with public health advice. The platforms used included those more frequently used by young people such as Spotify, Mobsta, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok as well as partnerships with Cool FM.

After the initial closing down of schools, youth clubs and youth organisations, the use of remote engagement platforms such as Zoom, Skype and WhatsApp became more common practice, although it tended to be those services that engaged with children and young people directly, and supported NGO/youth organisations who also engaged directly with children and young people.

The use of Departmental/agency websites also provided a useful method and focus for disseminating information. These provided a variety of resources including, for example,

\(^7\) https://www.niccy.org/coronavirusinfo

Children and young people’s experiences of accessing information

The KLTS and the YLTS both asked the question ‘How much do you agree or disagree: The Government has provided information on Coronavirus in a child-friendly way’.

Table 8.1: How much do you agree or disagree: The Government has provided information on Coronavirus in a child-friendly way

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>KLTS (%)</th>
<th>YLTS (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>1,988</td>
<td>2,043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS & YLTS 2021

“Their should listen to young people more and take their needs into consideration as much as they do with adults. Just because we are younger does not mean we don’t matter as much. Our education was greatly affected and our mental health as a whole was equally as greatly impacted. I felt as though during the pandemic we young people were almost blamed for the spread of the virus when the vast majority of us did everything we could to protect the older generation but instead of listening to us and seeing we were trying to help, the government instead let the minority represent the majority. I would like the government to listen to us more and take us into consideration when they make decisions especially on things that impact us such as education.”

Young person, YLTS
41% of respondents to the KILTS agreed or strongly agreed that the government provided information in a child friendly way, with 20% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that information was provided in a child friendly way (39% had no opinion or didn’t know).

In contrast, a large proportion of the older young people responding to the YLTS thought the government needed a more effective way of communicating with them. 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed that information was provided a child friendly way, with 26% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the government has provided information in a child friendly way (38% had no opinion or didn’t know).

This indicates that the YLTS respondents, aged 16, were less convinced than their younger peers that the government provided information on COVID-19 in a child friendly way (26% compared to 41% agreeing or strongly agreeing).

**Understandable information**

Young people said the information they received needed to be clearer, more accessible and introduced in a structured way. Some young people thought the government ought to do more to advertise key messages relating to them on the internet and other social media platforms. A number of the young people thought the government needed to communicate more clearly the arrangements for coming out of lockdown.

“I would like the government to give more information about coronavirus to kids such as telling us what will happen about going to see family and informing us more about school.” (KILTS)

“I know I’m no MP or Prime Minister, but the advice I’ll give, is probably better than anything Boris could do - I would tell him that to talk about covid in a child friendly way.” (KILTS)

“More informative things about coronavirus in ways that children and young people will understand. Not all scientific, in ways that will be more easily understood and engaging to young people so that we are properly informed….” (YLTS)

“Have a more structured release of information without it constantly changing.” (YLTS)

“Make any information clear rather than confusing.” (YLTS)

“I believe that the governmental information was not too effective. Myself, as a young person instead relied upon hearing new information from other second hand news sources. However, the vaccine leaflets produced by HSC I feel were very useful at featuring key information.” (Young person, Children’s Law Centre Youth Panel)

There were concerns about receiving the appropriate information. Where they received their information from was also reflected by young people.

“I think probably providing like more advice or even more information about Coronavirus but like in a more easier way for like younger people to understand because I have a wee sister and she’s 14 and even she can’t understand some of the stuff and the words that are used.” (F3)

Young people with disabilities also had some strong views on the information they received:

“I definitely don’t think they explained it for kids that have disabilities, especially my age, like I haven’t got a clue but now I’m fine, but I definitely think they didn’t explain it right.” (F2)

“I just found the whole Covid thing really stressful in a way because they didn’t explain it properly and I was just confused all the
time. And they keep changing the rules and it’s just hard to keep up with the rules and stuff.” (F2)

When asked about where they received information from, for example, TV or social media:

“Yeah, I think we did (receive information) but I don’t think we got the full picture like I think it was just snippets of what they thought was happening because nobody really knew what was happening and I don’t think they were too certain at the very start about what it was or like how it would affect people and stuff like that.” (F3)

“I think that the information could have been given more clearly – it was really only announced on the news and most young people I know don’t watch the news.” (W3)

Young people made some suggestions for better communication:

“Advertise things like helplines and guidance for young people more regularly on platforms such as social media and television” (KLTS)

“Going on social media platforms like Instagram or tik tok and making videos saying to leave our opinions in the comments, but in a non cringy way because that will make us think less of the situation. Treat us like adults and with respect and we will give the same back. Try to get to (up to) speed with what we are doing but be respectful with it” (YLTS)

Some younger respondents to the KLTS were concerned about the tone of reporting and information:

“They should say it in a softer way because the news is how I became scared of coronavirus.” (KLTS)

“I would say that they are doing a good job but sometimes when I have to watch the news, briefings etc it can get sad.” (KLTS)

“…. don’t make the news all bad…” (KLTS)

“The news reports caused me anxiety” (KLTS)

One young person expressed a slightly different viewpoint:

“Yes, I understood it but didn’t listen that often as it just got me down knowing I can’t meet up with friends.” (W3)

**COVID-19 Guidance**

Young people from Include Youth also reported conflicting information from media, government, social workers and education support saying that young people didn’t know the guidelines. They highlighted that there was no child friendly guidance published to inform young people and that they do not have a clear understanding of the ever changing guidelines. In addition, there were differing guidelines in different parts of the UK, on the island of Ireland and throughout the world.

“We weren’t really aware of the guidelines or why they were in place. We were just told not to go out. We had no access to information and no way to tell people who mattered what we thought.” (F8)

“There’s just not enough. Why did they do the things they did, the whole world is in a pandemic and they (the government) put on a eat out to help out scheme. None of it makes sense! The guidelines had nothing about mental health it had nothing about how they can help. A lot of people went downhill.” (F5)

Some young people felt that any future public health messaging needed to be developed in consultation with young people.

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“We have ideas for how to talk to young people and make them listen. They should be using things like TikTok and social media. They should look us in the eyes and talk to us. There could be links to more general info, but they need stuff for young people too. I don’t even know how to find the guidelines.” (F8)

A young BME person said:

“There was no clear information and decisions were taken far too late. Like wearing masks – people in (my home country) were all wearing masks far earlier and we were told we didn’t need them and then lots later we did,” (F7)

Support organisations for both Roma and Traveller communities felt it was important for these populations to have targeted information from health and education services. While this is an ongoing issue it was exacerbated during the pandemic. Services should work with these communities to understand what methods and platforms will work best for them to receive emergency information and changes to services.

Young people being stigmatised

Young people strongly felt that some sections of society and the media have stereotyped them as ‘serial spreaders’ and blamed them for prolonging restrictions. They felt stigmatised by adults during the pandemic and that there was no real dialogue between generations to tackle this. A lot of information was perceived as demonising young people for breaking COVID regulations rather than trying to educate and bring communities together.

“People just assumed we were going to be irresponsible. We were always just told to think of older people but we were thinking about them and wanted to do our best. Who was thinking of us?” (F8)

“Children are not the main spreaders…. they are not inside anywhere where the virus could live apart from schools and their home.” (KLTS)
“We are also given all the blame for the spread of covid and were presented in the media as the people who are killing grandparents and loved ones, even those of us who are following the guidelines.” (YLTS)

“We have been blamed for a lot of the spreading even though it is not our fault as we are being stereotyped and discriminated against as a group. Additionally, we have been held back from normal teenage things and are missing out.” (YLTS)

“People are very quick to blame young people for the spread of COVID but this is simply not true and it is just scapegoating, I think that the Government need to address that everyone has a had role in the spread of COVID, not just us young people.” (YLTS)

“We’ve given up our teenage years while still being blamed for the spread of COVID by the government.” (YLTS)

“It’s not our fault that some of us and our friends got COVID. We had to go to school and take transport, so it was always going to happen. People should have been looking out for us instead of blaming us.” (F7)

Reliability of information

There was an awareness and recognition that information children and young people received could not be automatically trusted. With so much information in circulation there was at times confusion as to whether young people where reading or receiving the latest up to date guidance. The information surrounding restrictions and regulations were very difficult to follow and were not explained clearly throughout the pandemic.

“Prevent misinformation being spread.” (YLTS)

“The lack of information for the procedure of GCSE grading, I think a lot of us feel misinformed” (YLTS)

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum’s (NIYF) ‘Our Voices Aren’t in Lockdown’ briefing report11 reported that whilst there were high levels of confidence from young people in understanding of COVID-19 and trusting the factual information they received, there was a desire by young people (73%) to get more appropriate, factual information.

In the NIYF’s earlier report, ‘Voices in lockdown’12, it is suggested that in order to reduce the impact of ‘fake news’, a single point of contact for information, targeted at and for young people, updated as events and restrictions change, would provide trusted and accessible information and could improve awareness and reduce the spread of salacious fake news.

“Not many people, let alone a young person will read a 12-page document on any given issue!” (Young person, NIYF)13

One young person raised the issue of how, in the absence of understandable information from government, people were sourcing information from social media which would not necessarily be accurate or helpful and could in fact be very damaging:

“…do you remember the way they said about beds, that they only had specific rooms for you know normal kids and for special kids and so the kids with special needs if they would have had to make the hard choice to put them down or let the other one live, they were saying this sort of stuff.” (F2)

13 Ibid
Children and Young People being heard and understood

Article 7 of NICCY’s legislation stipulates that we seek the views of children and young people on issues that concern them. Engaging young people on this research is a prime example of our participative work. Through emphasising Article 12 of the UNCRC, our role includes supporting, advising and encouraging statutory bodies and agencies to do the same.

In late 2019, NICCY was invited to sit on the Participation in Decision Making Project Board, a work stream linked to the outworking of the CYPS. We have provided considered advice on the meaningful participation of children and young people including on the need for cross departmental support in light of the The Children’s Service Co-operation Act (CSCA); the importance of inclusivity of all, including the most vulnerable; the need for appropriate participative training for staff; the importance of both measuring the impact of any engagement and providing feedback.

More practically, the NICCY Youth Panel supports the work of the Commissioner and her office. There are 154 members of the youth panel who guide our priority work areas, which includes COVID-19. Throughout the last business year (2020/21), we met with the panel, or subgroups of the panel, on 90 occasions, many of these meetings pertaining to COVID-19 related issues. This included a number of meetings directly with the Commissioner on the impact of COVID-19; a series of meetings with CCEA on exam / assessment issues and a direct meeting with the Minister of Health, raising children and young people’s health and wellbeing issues.

The QUB Report highlights that during the initial lockdown period when high level strategic decisions where being made, children and young people’s involvement or engagement in decision making was not a priority. The report articulates how ‘few interviewees spoke of consulting with children and young people on strategic decisions, or of imparting information (directly) to them.’

A representative from the Department for Communities shared:

“… because there is a real dilemma for me around how you make sure that all voices are heard, how you make sure that you are engaged in a true co-designed process, but particularly in an emergency situation how you temper that with a group that is manageable in size but also allows for swift decision-making, because particularly in an emergency there isn’t the time for twelve-week consultation.”

The Departments did report examples when they managed to engage directly with children and young people. Some Departments used their associated ALBs or NGO organisations that they support to engage directly with children and young people and feedback the findings.

There were few examples of Executive Ministers engaging with children and young people during the initial lockdown period, perhaps reflecting differing priorities in an emergency situation.

(The then) First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O’Neill were scheduled to host a youth press conference with (older) young people on July 7th 2020, to be recorded live although broadcast shortly after. Young people were recruited for the event and questions prepared.

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15 Ibid, Pg. 67
Unfortunately, just 2 days before the scheduled event, the Ministers sent their apologies and the press conference had been cancelled. The young people were told that it would be rearranged in the near future. However, it was not until the 21st December, 2020 that the First Minister and deputy First Minister held a Q&A event with a different cohort of young people (of primary age) who had pre-recorded their questions.\textsuperscript{16}

“They should maybe interview pupils, get someone that understands and feels the same way as the rest of us, and make sure that everything in the news isn’t negative, maybe even some little details that are given that say it’s getting better.”

Young person, YLTS

The Health Minister and both the Department for Communities (DfC) Minister and interim DfC Minister, and the Education Minister also met with children and young people. More recently in March 2021, the NI Youth Forum met with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Minister to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people and how she could support their input to high level Covid decision making. Positively, the DfI Minister has also expressed an interest in forming a Youth Forum within the Department.

Department of Health (DoH), through their partnership with VOYPIC and its Participation Forum, also sought the views of young people with care experience. Members of the same Forum met with members of the Health Committee and were invited to participate in a group established by the Public Health Agency, tasked with the development of messaging aimed at young people during the ongoing COVID pandemic.

As part of the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) initiative, Young Leaders and Ambassadors, along with senior civil servants, took part in an online COVID-19 Adherence focus group to gather the views and opinions of young people in relation to the current COVID-19 restrictions and the messaging relating to those restrictions.

The Education Authority’s Youth Service, under the direction of the Education Minister, carried out the ‘My Voice – Education Through Covid’ engagement programme, gathering the views of children and young people through lockdown.

However, when looking further afield, we see governments making more conscientious efforts to make space to give young people an audience by engaging directly with children and young people, listening to their concerns and hearing their voices.

In Norway, the Government has held several press conferences for children and young people\textsuperscript{17}. The first one was held on March 16th, 2020, only four days after the government closed the schools on March 12th. The Prime Minister attended several of these, along with the Minister of Children and Family Affairs and the Minister of Education. Some municipalities have also held press conferences for children and young people.

\textsuperscript{16} \url{https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=230045135391383&ref=watch_permalink}

\textsuperscript{17} \url{https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/statsministeren-holder-pressekonferanse-for-barn/id2693657/?fbclid=IwAR1M9YiYN1JFz2_JQ_0luADS-OhCip04rrN1FyzJH9pznwF17nD4_v2F0NQ}
In Malta, the Prime Minister spoke with children and young people in the early stages of the pandemic on 27th March 2020. The Prime Minister realised the situation was not an easy one for children and young people to understand so instead of taking questions from journalists, the Prime Minister decided to answer questions from children about the pandemic and how it is affecting Malta.

In Wales, the First Minister along with the Minister for Education met young people from the Welsh Youth Parliament in April 2020, providing an opportunity for young people to share concerns directly with the Welsh Government.

Special press conferences for children and young people have been hosted in Canada, Australia, Sweden and Finland. In contrast, as noted above, it was not until late December 2020 that the First and deputy First Minister held their event with young people. Interestingly, one of the questions scheduled to be asked in the earlier cancelled press conference related to children and young people’s meaningful participation in the decision making process:

“Young people can make a significant contribution to restarting our society by sharing their ideas, concerns and solutions for adapting how we live with coronavirus. How we return to school and how we move forward. How will the Executive make sure they create space, opportunity and the right audience for young people’s voices to be heard so that you can benefit from the contributions children and young people have to make?” (NICCY Youth Panel Member)

Children and Young People’s experiences of being heard and understood

The KLTS and YLTS asked the question ‘How much do you agree or disagree: The Government listens to children when making decisions about Coronavirus’.

Table 8.2: How much do you agree or disagree: The Government listens to children when making decisions about Coronavirus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>KLTS (%)</th>
<th>YLTS (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>1,978</td>
<td>2,045</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KLTS & YLTS, 2021

For young people responding to the KLTS, 43% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Government listened to children when making decisions about Coronavirus (note there was a large percentage (38%) that had no opinion or didn’t know).

Within the YLTS, almost three in four of the respondents (73%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Government listened to children when making decisions about Coronavirus. Only 6% agreed or strongly agreed.

18  https://www.tvm.com.mt/en/news/live-pm-speaks-with-children-about-covid-18/?fbclid=IwAR29qpOoloGTQk9CM82rnK8TOPK2-sO5r7Ic70kWyyl3Mn3ygQ0mNjnxfk
As with the question about getting information to children and young people, the older cohort of young people had stronger opinions that their young peers that the government was not fulfilling its obligations to listen to children and young people. There was a deep feeling that young people needed to be consulted more about decisions that affected them.

**Seen but not heard**

The young people were quite critical of the lack of direct engagement by Government and how their thoughts and views were not sought. Some comments express a degree of exasperation at their continued exclusion:

“The government needs to be listening to children. Because the government doesn’t even listen to us children it’s like that saying children should be seen but not heard us children are not something to be taken granted of, we are the future of this world.” (KLTS)

“The advice I would give the Government to help them make sure that children’s rights are protected during a pandemic are, that they listen to what children have to say and what they think.” (KLTS)

“I feel like the government should listen more to children Just because we are smaller does not mean that we don’t want to (have a) say about what is happening in the world.” (KLTS)

“Listen to our ideas and give us responsibility in our world because you were one and you should know how it feels to not be listened to please change our world.” (KLTS)

“Ask young people more questions about how this has affected us so that they answer more questions and be able to try and allocate funds to try to fix the issues that young people may face such as declines in mental health. Don’t just assume you know what goes through the minds of a teenager in today’s society, find out by asking.” (YLTS)

“Listen to what we have to say and not just push us under the rug which is what it feels like they do to young people a lot of the time.” (YLTS)

“I believe the government should actually listen to young people as we are the people who are going to have to pay back all the money the government spent during the pandemic and that if they don’t listen to us, things are just going to revert back to the way they were.” (YLTS)

“The Government could also give us more chances to voice our opinions for change, even though we are not of the voting age we have numerous different opinions that need to be voiced and listened to.” (YLTS)

“Create an environment where we feel heard and understood. A lot of the time it feels as though the government and older generations, in general, look down on us and dismiss our opinions and feelings…” (YLTS)

The NIYF’s ‘Our Voices - Speaking Truth to Power’ report reinforced the views of the young people responding to the YLTS by reporting that 89% of respondents to their survey felt that the voice of young people has not been heard during COVID-19.20

Young People at the Children’s Law Centre’s (CLC) Youth Panel21 felt there was limited attempt to reach young people directly meaning that many young people were not empowered to engage with these events. There is also significant lack of feedback from

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21  Feedback received from the Children’s Law Centre Youth Panel (June 2021)
any event that did take place to tell them how their voices were heard.

"I never took part in anything like this, but I know there were some zoom calls with young people. It would be useful if there were more of these spread across different sections of society to ensure equal representation for all. Young people are one of the most affected groups with COVID-19 due to school closures etc. and therefore gathering views from them is highly important." (Young person, CLC Youth Panel)

“I don’t really know what happened when we did those surveys. I didn’t see anything which made me think anyone had listened to us.” (F7)

**Exclusion**

Many young people felt they had been excluded from expressing their views, opinions and ideas and that there were no opportunities for them to share their views on issues affecting them during the pandemic.

"During the pandemic I was never asked my views on the issues I faced nor were any other young people I know." (Young person, CLC Youth Panel)

NIYF’s ‘Our Voices - Speaking Truth to Power’ report, showed all of the young people questioned believed it to be important to involve young people in making decisions about life during COVID-19 with an average rating of 8.4 out of 10 in terms of importance\(^{22}\).

One of the starkest statistics from the report reflects the feelings of children and young people of being excluded from the decision making process – feedback from the respondents highlighted that 74% of young people had no faith or confidence in leadership from government.\(^{23}\)

**Out of Touch**

Some young people felt that decision makers were not in touch with their experiences and needs. They talked about their education and how decisions were made and if they were in the best interests of children and young people.

“I don’t think they have actually asked young people though (sic) what do you want, they have all just kind of discussed it themselves.” (F3)

“I think as well, not to be a bit weird about it, but I think a lot of people making decisions have been out of school for a long time and they have kinda forgotten what it’s like.” (F3)

“I definitely think we weren’t – they weren’t thinking about kids that had special needs like what it would be like going to school and going to work and going to TEC.” (F2)

Young people also felt they were not listened to:

“Not really, our voices weren’t heard.” (F5)

“I feel like that they weren’t listening to us because like a lot of times whenever a lot of people think about us special needs people, think that we’re just kids that need treatment 24/7, like that we need taken care of all the time. And a lot of us want to say stuff but they don’t take it personally. They think it’s a joke and stuff and they weren’t listening to us for many years.” (F2)

There was a degree of scepticism by one young person:


\(^{23}\) Pg. 10, ibid
“It’s just the way it is, it’s about who you have in positions of power…. Decisions should be made by people who want to run countries and cities by including discussions with average people living there” (F5)

**Conclusion**

Young people have expressed frustration that there was seemingly little consideration on how communications will have been received by them, whether it would be informative, understandable or simply confusing. The ever changing guidance and advice made for inconsistency and confusion. Young people felt they were negatively stereotyped and blamed for spreading the virus.

In many cases it seems that NGOs, community and youth organisations filled the information void, passing on key messages and guidance in formats appropriate to their audience – especially to those most vulnerable young people, for example, young people with disabilities or migrant young people. There is no evidence that there was a co-ordinated structural hierarchy sequence for messaging which, if in place, would have improved the speed and accuracy of information reaching children and young people.

Each Government Department should develop information for children and young people in an appropriate, relevant style and format at the same time as information for the wider population. This information should then be shared through a structured network of agencies from the Departments and their associated agencies, to practitioners, children and young people, their parents, carers and guardians.

For many years young people have been asking to have a say in our society, to have their voices heard and make a vital contribution to community at large. For many years, when given the opportunity, young people have also demonstrated that they can make an immense contribution to society.

For this report, young people, especially older young people, have told us how they have been, by and large, excluded from the decision making process – not consulted despite sacrificing so much of their lives. Young people are asking to be part of the solution, believing they can offer positive contributions as we move out of the pandemic.

The QUB Report highlighted a comment from a Department of Education representative who stated,

‘it would’ve been great if we’d had those [child participation forums]… from the start… it just wasn’t possible.’

The New Decade New Approach Deal highlighted the commitment ‘to put civic engagement and public consultation at the heart of policy-making, recognising the vital role that wider society plays in supporting effective and accountable Government.’

It is of immense importance that children and young people are proactively and structurally included within this civic engagement.

It is therefore welcomed that an outworking of the CYPS is the Participation in Decision Making Project which aims to put in place effective participation and engagement structures across NI. It will do this by

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25 *New Decade, New Approach January 2020*, Pg.13
promoting dialogue with children and young people that is accessible to all and meaningful for those who participate, with a focus on regular, inclusive, two-way engagement. It aims to develop a Participation in Decision Making policy statement which will consider the key principles of participation and the roles and responsibilities of departments and other children’s authorities. This must be a critical focus moving forward from the pandemic and a key element of the CYPS Delivery Plan – making sure that there are effective mechanisms in place to ensure that the views of children and young people are elicited, and then taken into account in statutory decision-making.

Recommendations

The Government needs to ensure appropriate and relevant information reaches the appropriate and relevant children and young people. Information should be shared through a structured network of agencies from the Departments through practitioners to children and young people, their parents, carers and guardians. Government also needs to ensure that its Departments and their key agencies have the ability and resources to engage with, listen to and consider the views and opinions of children and young people.

8.1 Each Government Department should prioritise developing information for children and young people, especially those most vulnerable, in an appropriate, relevant style and format, alongside, and at the same time as information for the wider population.

8.2 Each Government Department should sign up to and endorse the national Participation Policy as developed through the Participation in Decision Making initiative led by DE and provide the appropriate resources and training to ensure that a network of participation structures is established.

8.3 Executive Ministers should engage with and communicate directly with young people on matters that impact on their lives.

“You should take more decisions while thinking about the children, they do not know how we feel because they are not children living through these tough times so they are giving us no sense of security. On so many occasions I have cried myself to sleep.”

Young person, YLTS
9. YOUTH JUSTICE
Children who encounter the youth justice system are frequently overlooked, yet are amongst the most vulnerable, marginalised groups in society. For instance, we know many of these children have had adverse childhood experiences including (but not limited to): abuse, substance misuse, the care system, experience of mental health problems, and exclusion from school.

Despite their vulnerabilities, their label as an offender regularly overshadows their status as a child. When routinely viewed in this way, there is an associated danger that their rights as children rather than being understood as fundamental and intrinsic, are instead circumvented, ignored and disregarded. All too often, these young people are often misjudged and wrongly deemed to have forfeited their right to public empathy.

The youth justice system in Northern Ireland is facing unchartered challenges. On the surface, youth crime rates, particularly acquisitive and peer motivated crimes, have decreased during COVID-19, and there have been fewer engagements of young people in the youth justice system. However, existing issues of poverty, poor mental health, domestic abuse and disengagement with school are areas of acute risk for these young people. As outlined in previous chapters, lockdown restrictions have increased the risk of harm to young people within the home including exposure to neglect and domestic and intrafamilial abuse. In such situations, the heightened risks within the home have led to non-compliance with social distancing rules, which in turn can lead to criminalisation through lack of adherence to lockdown measures.

NICCY appreciates that there are complexities in implementing the rights of children and young people who offend. The following articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are incorporated as underlying principles.

Article 3: All decisions taken which affect children’s lives should be taken in the child’s best interests, Article 12: Children have the right to have their voices heard in all matters concerning them, Article 19: Children have the right to be protected against all forms of violence, abuse, maltreatment, or exploitation. Article 37: Children should not be subject to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and Article 40: Children accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment. There should be a variety of solutions to help these children become positively integrated within their communities. Prison should only be the last choice.

It is an agreed principle, enshrined in law in NI, that the criminal justice system must take into account the best interests of children. Therefore, there is a bespoke youth justice system in NI that recognises children’s inherent vulnerability and opportunities for the future. Article 40 (3) (a) of the UNCRC outlines that State Parties shall:

“seek to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law, and, in particular: (a) The establishment of a minimum age below which children shall be presumed not to have the capacity to infringe the penal law.”

In its COVID-19 statement, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) highlighted that consideration needs to be given to the impact of restrictions on participation in trials which may take

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1 Smithson, H. (2020) Marginalised yet vulnerable: The impact of COVID-19 on young people in the youth justice system · Manchester Metropolitan University (mmu.ac.uk)

alternative formats and the ways in which children and youth justice staff are able to adapt to remote modes of working, in detention and in the community, in ways which are in line with the best interests of the child. The Committee gave two specific recommendations relating to children and young people deprived of their liberty:

**Recommendation 8:** Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.

**Recommendation 9:** Prevent the arrest or detention of children for violating State guidance and directives relating to COVID-19.

This chapter outlines the areas in youth justice where children and young people have been most affected by the pandemic including Youth Courts; digital exclusion; children and young people’s involvement with the Youth Justice Agency, including Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JCC); policing throughout the pandemic including issuing of Community Resolution Notices; the PSNI’s use of Stop and Search powers and the temporary introduction of Spit and Bite Guards. Throughout this chapter NICCY aims to reflect on the issues facing children and young people from a child rights-based perspective and recommend how we can build back fairer, focusing on Northern Ireland’s children’s and young people’s best interests.

**Policing**

Throughout the pandemic, the PSNI implemented a COVID-19 prevention plan to ‘Prevent, Protect and Detect’ crime against vulnerable people including children, which focused on the specific vulnerabilities arising from COVID-19. The PSNI created a strong direction for officers, ‘Engage, Explain, Encourage and finally, Enforce’ as their primary means of engagement, with the open methods of engagement primarily asking children and young people ‘are you ok’, rather than ‘why are you out’.

According to PSNI statistics, overall crime levels in Northern Ireland had dropped by one third during the COVID-19 lockdown. Most categories of offences showed significant falls. When comparing figures for the five weeks which followed lockdown on 23 March 2020 with the same period in the preceding year, there were 3,000 fewer offences reported during lockdown. However, recorded crime levels are below average for the time of year, whereas antisocial behaviour is above average. Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, there were a total of 1,848 Community Resolution Notices (CRNs) issued to under 18s by the PSNI; 585 offences related to the contravention of the Coronavirus Health Protection Regulations.

Children who are in public areas or who are in contact with agencies will also be more visible due to lockdown. They have often been demonised across the media,

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5 DOJ/PSNI Submission to NICCY in advance of Children’s Champions Meeting, March 2021
6 PSNI (2021) [crime-bulletin-mar-21.pdf](psni.police.uk)
7 Correspondence from PSNI to NICCY, April 2021
without understanding or thought towards the personal circumstances they may be in. Further detail is provided at Chapter 5.

Throughout the focus groups conducted by NICCY, a common theme emerged from vulnerable children and young people - particularly those who are estranged from families and living independently - that they had to negotiate lockdown restrictions and the implications on their mental wellbeing because of enforced isolation. Qualitative feedback powerfully conveyed that some young people actively made decisions to break COVID-19 regulations to prevent further decline in their own mental health or that of their peers:

“I have just buried my best friend, that is the second person I have buried this year (due to suicide). Too many people are only talking about covid and never mental health. Mental health is bad just now” (F5)

While some young people were of the perception that these breaches were common, in reality the vast majority of children and young people adhered closely to issued regulations and guidelines.

Going forward, the PSNI needs to continue to take a trauma informed approach that firstly ascertains the safety and wellbeing and best interests of a child or young person.

Cessation of Youth Services and increased anti-social behaviour

As outlined in Chapter 5, the temporary restrictions enforced due to COVID-19 created a massive disconnect with children and young people in their communities and emphasised the need for sustained investment in local, community-based youth organisations.

Through the QUB research commissioned by NICCY, youth services highlighted difficulties faced in the initial lockdown in working with children referred to their organisations by the police. They noted that, for those new to the organisation, building relationships was ‘almost impossible’ to do remotely and that they faced challenges in delivering restorative practices. A key issue in this regard, discussed by one group of youth workers, were the restrictions on their work related to young people’s presence in public spaces. Detached youth work had not been operating for them during the pandemic and therefore they were unable to offer the usual support and advice to young people at risk of criminalisation on the streets. This, in turn, restricted their ability to engage with young people.

Recent months have brought into sharp focus the impact of the pandemic on children in precarious or vulnerable situations. As reflected in Chapter 7, there are particular risks that children in conflict settings are subject to; this was magnified in the unrest and disturbances experienced in recent months. A young person in the JJC told NICCY that they predicted a ‘spike’ in admissions to Woodlands due to increasing activities within groups of young people. When asked why that was the case, they responded:

“But just down where I live now because of COVID, there’s been way more gangs coming, like anti-social behaviour…It’s not just where I live, people are coming from [mentioned surrounding towns]. Since COVID has been round, more gangs have been coming. It’s actually got to the stage now where there’s armed police patrolling the area every night.” (F1)
Criminal exploitation

The context of March and April 2021 activities and riotous behaviour amongst young people in some communities has expedited the urgency of collaborative, cross party work on peace, reconciliation and focused community interventions within specific areas that have seen extreme civil unrest. The actions of these children and young people are a direct result of criminal exploitation and criminal coercion, where criminals are controlling or coercing young people to deal drugs and to take part in criminal activities including rioting in the streets. This is further explored in Chapter 7.

Figures provided by the Department of Justice (DoJ) to NICCY indicated that, as of May 2021, ten juveniles had been arrested as a direct consequence of the civil unrest; five juveniles were 28 day charged with riot to appear at Youth Court; three juveniles were referred for Youth Engagement Clinic and, at the time of receipt of the information, two juveniles were on police bail.

Reports and media coverage across the civil unrest have emphasised that children as young as 12 and 13 have been encouraged and congratulated by adults to engage in violence against the PSNI; this is a tragic reflection of the social, political and cultural context. The following quote emphasises the factors which contributed to the unrest, including the impact of lockdown:

“There were some young people who wanted to watch, some young people who maybe wanted to participate….Those young people didn’t really understand why they were there. It was hyped up, there was a load of hype on social media, there was a load of hype everywhere and our kids were buying into it - and they’re kids, they are going to buy

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10 If a person is charged and released by the police on bail, the first court appearance must be within 28 days from the date of the charge. This usually takes place in the magistrates’ court, where the District Judge will consider if there is enough evidence to connect the defendant to the crime.

11 Correspondence from DOJ Operations and Resilience Planning Branch to NICCY, 6th May 2021
into it. Social media is so controlling. I was in those shoes myself once, and it’s very easy to think that this is what I want to do because everyone else is doing it and it’s a bit of entertainment, it’s an adrenaline rush. You’re in lockdown as well, there’s nothing really for young people to do, no activities or nothing.” (Youth Worker Shankhill Road Apr 2021)

It has been previously mentioned there are a number of causal factors beyond COVID-19 which have contributed to this civil unrest. It should be noted that the Executive has recognised the crucial role of local youth services in diverting children and young people from riotous behaviour and the detrimental impact that the pandemic has played in halting engagement during COVID-19.

Stop and Search
Stop and Search is an operational tool used to prevent, detect, and investigate crime as well as to bring offenders to justice. It has been previously mentioned there are a number of causal factors beyond COVID-19 which have contributed to this civil unrest. It should be noted that the Executive has recognised the crucial role of local youth services in diverting children and young people from riotous behaviour and the detrimental impact that the pandemic has played in halting engagement during COVID-19.

Between 1 April 2020 and March 2021, a total of 26,592 people were stopped and searched in Northern Ireland – the total number arrested were 1,452, an average arrest rate of 6%. Of those persons stopped and searched, 52 were identified as 12 and under, with a 0% arrest rate. 11% (2,996) of those stopped were aged 17 and under. Of these, two out of every three (66%) were stopped and searched under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Of those persons stopped and searched identifying as 13 to 17 years old, 114 were arrested, with an arrest rate of 3.8%.

The effectiveness of stop and search has long been called into question, with many young people continuing to believe they are discriminated against when they are stopped and searched. Developmental psychological evidence would allude to the normality among adolescents to display characteristics such as defensiveness, aggressiveness and ‘acting out’, and therefore may be more vulnerable to police stops where they fail the police ‘attitude test’. As described earlier, the pandemic has created a number of causal factors amongst young people that may perpetuate situations and feelings of aggression, vulnerability and defensiveness when questioned about why they are out of their house or in gatherings during lockdown. This, in turn, has the potential to heighten young people’s vulnerability to police stops.

PSNI recently hosted an Nl-wide survey engaging with children and young people on their perceptions and/or experiences of stop and search, which NICCY advised on. The survey asked for recommendations to ensure future engagements are more positive. The information gathered will provide a unique opportunity to create better relationships between young people and the PSNI. Often Stops and Searches are the only reflection that vulnerable young people have of the PSNI and this is often a negative one. Therefore, we have a chance to reflect and change this outcome.

Spit and bite guards
In 2016, when the Committee examined the UK on how well it is meeting its children’s rights obligations, it recommended that the

12 BBC (2021) Keeping teen rioters away from Belfast interfaces. May2021
14 PSNI (2021) Stop and Search Statistics Apr 2020-Mar2021
UK Government prohibit the police using any harmful devices on children. Specifically, the Committee was concerned about:

“The use of physical restraint on children to maintain good order and discipline in young offenders’ institutions and of pain-inducing techniques on children in institutional settings in England, Wales and Scotland, and the lack of a comprehensive review of the use of restraint in institutional settings in Northern Ireland;”

It is within the context of this recommendation that NICCY has considered the use of spit and bite guards on children and young people during the pandemic.

A spit and bite guard is a breathable, mesh material garment that covers the face and head. This prevents the wearer from being able to assault officers, staff and members of the public by means of spitting, thereby reducing the potential of communicable / contagious diseases. A spit and bite guard will not prevent biting - but could lessen the degree of injury and contamination. It can only be applied to a person who is spitting, has spat, is preparing to spit or is threatening to spit or is biting, has bitten, is preparing to bite or is threatening to bite.

The PSNI took the decision to issue a Spit Guard Pro to protect against the physical hazard of spitting and/or biting as a direct precaution to the exposure risk of COVID-19 to PSNI Officers. As of May 2021, the PSNI confirmed there had been nine instances of

the use of spit and bite guards on children and young people under the age of 18.

NICCY expressed repeated concern about why these measures were introduced for use with children and young people (aged 10 and above). We were concerned about how their best interests were being taken into account as is required by the service procedure, and as per Article 3 of the UNCRC which requires the PSNI to consider the best interests of a child as the primary consideration in all actions concerning children.

Such concerns are shared by representatives from the voluntary and community sector (VCS) interviewed by the QUB researchers. They expressed concern about the policing of children during the pandemic, particularly highlighting the use of spit and bite guards by the PSNI and questioning their ‘proportionality’. This was resonant of views expressed elsewhere which have highlighted their non-compliance with domestic and international human rights standards.

In the last year, NICCY met with the PSNI several times regarding spit and bite guards. We welcome that policy and training in the use of Spit and Bite Guards now contain sections on Human Rights and Vulnerabilities. We also welcome that the Equality Impact Assessment (2021) regarding the use of spit and bite guards includes reference to UNCRC Article 3. We note that, in dealing with children, officers and staff are advised in training to exercise their duties to take account of the vulnerability inherent in their young age.

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17 CRC/C/GBR/CO/5 (2016) Para 38 (c)
19 Ibid
20 Correspondence from PSNI to NICCY, 18 May 2021
and to demonstrate vigilance and self-control when dealing with minors.\(^{23}\)

Nonetheless, we reiterate that under no circumstance should a child or young person under the age of 18 be subjected to the use of spit and bite guards. NICCY understands that there are times where identification of a child or young person is not possible and there is assumption the young person is mistaken for over 18. We welcomed\(^{24}\) the PSNI’s instructions around preventing the use of spit and bite guards “Where officers or staff are aware that a member of the public is under 18, the presumption will be that a Spit and Bite Guard should not be used”.\(^{25}\) Nonetheless, we understand there is still risk for PSNI Officers to potentially wrongly identify a young person as over 18, when circumstances do not allow officers to ascertain identification and age. Therefore, NICCY recommends that spit and bite guards should not be used where officers or staff are aware or believe that a member of the public is under 18.

Currently, if a Spit and Bite Guard has been placed over a child’s head, a referral can be made to an organisation such as Start 360 who specialises in helping young people between the ages of 11 and 24. NICCY believes that, given the few incidents that currently involve children and young people under the age of 18, it is crucial that any child or young person who has had a spit and bite guard used on them is automatically referred to a professional for assessment, such as the Duty Social Worker. It should be the Duty Social Worker only who recommends referrals for support, and mandatory follow ups should be made with the young person to ensure their safety and wellbeing.

**Impact of COVID-19 on Young People in Custody**

It is evident that the processes and arrangements in place for young people admitted to the youth justice system were significantly impacted by the pandemic. As reflected through the QUB research, staff in the JJC were concerned about how they could ‘balance’ the ways in which they could deliver a service to ‘look after the children’ as well as ‘protect and look after staff as well’. This included managing staff absences. As one representative from the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) noted:

“It’s that whole thing about children coming into our centre, admissions coming in, and you don’t know where children have been beforehand, so there’s no tracing their backgrounds. So, a lot of staff angst, a lot of staff worries, and all the issues then obviously of social distancing, or being able to do all the things the staff are asking us to do.”\(^{26}\)

NICCY engaged both with Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre (YOC) and Woodlands JJC (meeting with young people and visiting the JJC) during the COVID-19 period on their arrangements and the impact on children and young people. Appropriate sanitising procedures were put in place; visiting restricted and social distancing guidelines implemented. In both institutions, external providers of services were reduced and kept to a minimum and all family visits and court appearances conducted remotely. The cessation of all external visitors to the JJC,
was described by staff as ‘the most difficult thing for our young people’\textsuperscript{27}. Young people were also impacted by enforced isolation, increased time in cells/rooms and lack of social contact in response to COVID-19.

NICCY raised all concerns with the relevant authorities and sought assurance on how the impacts were being mitigated. We highlighted particular concern about the levels of education made available to the young people in the JJC during the lockdown, an issue raised with both the Youth Justice Agency and Education Authority. Whilst resumption of education was achieved by May 2020 and schooling provided until the end of the summer term, this was on a reduced basis and continued to be in the 2020/21 school year.

**Admissions**

With regards admissions, annual comparison of the average number of young people admitted to Woodlands JJC revealed a significant reduction in the total number of admissions. However, there has been little variation in the average monthly Police and Criminal Evidence Order (PACE) admissions (based on annual averaged figures).

Whilst the JJC representative interviewed by QUB noted that ‘a lot of young people have got access to bail’ and there was a sense of increased flexibility in swift decision making about sending young people to Woodlands\textsuperscript{28}, evidence suggests that there is still a continuing trend of young people on remand. Lack of suitable accommodation or bail address continues to be one of the main reasons that young people are held in custody. It is not only against a child’s right to deprive them of their liberty for this reason; it further highlights a significant flaw in our system that should be addressed cross-

departmentally through the proposed DOJ/DOH Shared Campus.

**Prison Visitation**

A further way in which detained young people were impacted by the pandemic was with regards visits. The QUB research reflected the difficulties posed for young people as a result of the cessation of external visitors, including in-person visits from family and professionals. Whilst restrictions reflected what occurred in the community, the impact is potentially more significant for children in the JJC particularly with regards to “feelings of isolation” and being further disconnected from their community.\textsuperscript{29}

Whilst young people were enabled virtual access to families and friends, there was a noted reluctance to engage in these forms of communication. One staff member informed NICCY that demand for virtual platforms is low and that some young people have struggled to adapt to this form of communication. One young person outlined their reservations about the use of online platforms:

“Personally, I don’t like it and meetings are quite easily hacked into it, if you look at YouTube, you’ll see hundreds of videos of people hacking into meetings, it’s just privacy reasons as well... It’s frustrating not seeing people face to face”. (F1)

**Youth Diversions during COVID-19**

Interactive methodologies were also employed to enable continued support and services to young people. Outside of the custody setting, processes and support moved online, temporarily in some cases. One YJA representative described to the QUB researchers how they facilitated children’s

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid
access to support. Online counselling courses and training courses were bought for children and they were provided with phone top-ups or Wi-Fi to be able to access them, highlighting the creativity and innovative thinking used to support children and young people.

A ‘new normal’ was described by another YJA representative in relation to the delivery of youth justice services in the community. Since August 2020, face-to-face services have resumed in a ‘blended approach’ delivering, one YJA representative estimated, 80% of their business.30

However, despite early intervention practices and diversion schemes continuing, the fact that the majority of the work could not be conducted face to face during the pandemic arguably impacted its effectiveness. As one NGO representative informed QUB:

“I think there has been a couple of experiences, negative experiences, of young people in the justice system, be it probation or youth justice, who have said that the experience that they’ve got, and it has been very tokenistic. It has been, you know, a twenty-minute Zoom, and as opposed to an opportunity really to talk or to explore their offence it’s been more, you know, ‘you have been charged with this. It relates to drugs and alcohol. Here’s a presentation on drugs and alcohol. Look through it. Do you have questions?’ ‘No’, ‘okay that’s the end of the Zoom’. So, I think, a lot of families have said to me, and a lot of the young people have said, that was a bit of a nonsense.”31

Court Processes

In March 2020, all Youth Courts migrated online via Skype and, at the time of writing, this operation remains in place. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues in terms of delays to court process. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to charge cases dealt with at youth magistrates’ courts, was 117 days, and the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates’ courts, was 242 days.32 Whilst we do not know the full impact of COVID-19 on delays within Youth Courts, we believe that delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have a disproportionate impact on a young person. As the literature33 suggests, six months for a 17-year-old is very different to six months for a 25-year-old.

30 Ibid
31 Ibid
Evidence highlights the importance of hearings being held as close in time to the offence as possible; delays have implications in terms of children’s mental health and in relation to children’s understanding of the consequences of behaviours. CRC (2019) General Comment 24 emphasises that delays to the conclusion of cases runs the risk of losing the desired outcome and recommends that:

“States parties set and implement time limits for the period between the commission of the offence and the completion of the police investigation, the decision of the prosecutor (or competent body) to institute charges and the final decision by the court or other judicial body”

The Youth Justice Review (2011) stated that long delays affect every part of the system, from bail and remand to sentencing and rehabilitation. It denies justice to victims and defendants, undermines human rights, and erodes confidence in the criminal justice system and the rule of law. A recommendation to implement a statutory time limit from arrest to sentence and/or disposal of 120 days was never actioned, and almost a decade later there has still been no significant change in reductions to the length of court cases within Youth Justice. It remains to be seen how COVID-19 has affected the timeframes for cases to be dealt with in court, however it remains critical that this recommendation on a statutory time limit is implemented without further delay.

Remote Engagement and Participation in Court Processes

Throughout the discussions that the QUB researchers had with Departmental Officials, the rollout and use of digital mechanisms to continue business, including in court proceedings, has been celebrated as a success. However, it is not without its issues, particularly around its use by children and young people within Youth Justice Courts in Northern Ireland.

Digital exclusion is not simply about access to devices or reliable connections (although important), there are multiple barriers to digital participation including supporting a child’s confidence and additional support needs. Moving to digital mechanisms can cause anxiety and concerns about stigma. Children and young people have also reported attending hearings as ‘traumatic, judgemental, and disrespectful’; the fear is that this will be more prevalent online.

Official acknowledgment must be made of power imbalances and barriers to online participation, and, most importantly, to ensure that the young person always has unfettered access to their advocate.

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) Guidelines for Operation and Layout in Northern Ireland stated, ‘Research has shown that the physical court environment - the type of furniture, layout and seating arrangements – can influence communication. It can help people to play an active part in the process or can prevent people from feeling involved’.

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34 CRC/C/GC/24 General comment No. 24 (2019) on children’s rights in the child justice system
35 A Review of the Youth Justice System, Department of Justice, 2011
37 NICTS (2013) The Youth Court - Guidelines for Operation and layout in Northern Ireland (judiciaryni.uk)
This is physically impossible to do online and risks limiting the young person’s effective engagement with the court proceedings.

An interim Practice Direction[^38] was established by the Court of Judicature of NI regarding remote hearings during COVID-19. Within its overarching principles, it was highlighted that every remote hearing would be planned and conducted in a manner designed to secure every party’s right to a fair hearing, and that the Rules of the Court would apply fully to every remote hearing. The interim Practice Direction explained that participants would be given information to access the online courts and recommended to try before the designated time. However, it did not describe what should happen if a participant connection is lost, there is an unreliable internet connection, or there are issues with data on mobile phones. This may put young people at a disadvantage when accessing their court cases. The ability to achieve a fair trial is also questionable where children face barriers to their effective participation due to use of online mechanisms.

Child and parental involvement in the court process is scrutinised following guidance laid out in the Guide to Case Management in Public Law Proceedings. Sir John Gillen (formerly known as The Rt Hon Lord Justice Gillen) stressed (citing UNCRC, Article 12) that “a child’s fundamental rights, including the right to be heard, must be respected in all forums.”[^39] As acknowledged in the QUB research, concerns have been raised in relation to the use of live links for children to attend remote court hearings. Implications arise in relation to the ability of a child to communicate with and instruct their legal representation, to understand proceedings and to effectively participate in the court process. These risks are particularly relevant for children where, for example, learning disabilities, literacy problems and mental health conditions may present additional challenges.[^40]

The aforementioned NICTS guidance states that, “All children should be in attendance at court on each occasion their case is being heard unless the District Judge (Magistrates’ Court) orders otherwise. If a child is being held in custody the court should wait until he or she is in the courtroom before dealing with his or her case”[^41]. However, it was evident that this was not routinely facilitated during the pandemic. This is due to the fact that the necessary quarantine measures in Woodlands JJC prohibit young offenders from attending any hearings within the first 10 days of their arrival into custody. This is due to the Skype suite being separate to quarantine measures, and therefore young people cannot access this area. Information provided by the YJA to NICCY noted that “all court proceedings are currently virtual through the Skype platform. Young people’s first court appearance is heard in their absence...following a second negative test result, all young people attend their virtual hearing.”[^42] Young people told NICCY of their concern at not being able to attend hearings:

“There’s one thing I’d like to say, the staff attend our court on behalf of us, I think we should be able to attend our own court, so we know what’s happening and we hear it. Because for all we know the staff could be saying something else than what the judge says, so I would prefer to be there” (F1)

[^38]: Interim Practice Direction 01-2020 [Rev 1] - Remote Hearings.pdf (judiciaryni.uk)
[^42]: Correspondence from YJA to NICCY, April 2021
“I think they should we should attend them because COVID isn’t only being transported to the court house. I wouldn’t see why we can’t come up to the Skype room and have them. It’s more dangerous transporting us to a courthouse because there’s more chance of us getting away than there is of us misbehaving or stuff, up in the Skype rooms, if we wear our masks.” (F1)

With COVID-19, we have an opportunity to take stock of issues and reform for a better, fairer future. The issues raised in relation to court processes can be addressed. The Department of Justice, alongside the Youth Justice Agency through Transitioning Youth Justice (2019) has the opportunity to address pre-court delays and maximise diversion opportunities pre-court. This would create a solution to the urgent need for action in addressing delays between offences and the commencement of court proceedings. These delays impact on everyone, including victims, witnesses and defendants.

Moving forward, we must recontextualise the argument to digital inclusion and the subsequent challenges that may arise for children involved in offending, due to the stigma associated with their offending and the high prevalence of their additional support needs. There is a need to address the mistrust of technology. It is therefore imperative all children and young people must have reasonable adjustments made during court proceedings and have access to an independent advocate regardless of remote participation within the court room itself.

**Conclusion**

Evidence in this chapter has demonstrated the significant impact of the pandemic on the rights of children in conflict with the law in relation to their access to services and in the administration of justice. Despite a willingness in both statutory and community sectors to adapt to remote ways of working with children in conflict with the law, concerns have been raised regarding potential gaps in the support and effectiveness of online participation.

As the pandemic and related restrictions continue, and consideration is given to the extension of ‘new ways of working’ to a time beyond the pandemic, decisions must not be made along the lines of efficiency and management preferences which undermine the best interests of the child. Attention must be given to the ways in which alternative arrangements could discriminate against particularly vulnerable groups of children. Further engagement with the justice sector is required to monitor custody decisions, children’s ability to maintain regular family contact, and the policing of children during the pandemic.

Post COVID-19, the criminal justice system will have to adapt following a period of delay and standstill. At present, developing a clear understanding of the impact is difficult and contingent on how agencies and organisations that support young people in contact with the law can adapt to their needs now restrictions are beginning to be lifted. Youth Justice Services are often the ‘eyes and ears’ supporting the most maligned yet vulnerable communities. The challenge of continuing to offer services that engage and support these groups, while planning for a ‘post COVID’ world nobody is sure of yet, will test the sector to the full.

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43 Department of Justice (2019) Transitioning Youth Justice
Recommendations

9.1 The PSNI must continue to embed a best interest and trauma informed approach to the young people it comes into contact with, including those accused of breaching COVID-19 restrictions, ensuring that arrest and detention are a measure of last resort\textsuperscript{46}.

9.2 Reflecting on the findings of the current survey work, the use of Stop and Search powers must be fundamentally reviewed and revised to ensure the most effective use of such powers that promote children’s best interests and community safety.

9.3 Spit and bite guards should not be used where officers or staff are aware or believe that a member of the public is under 18.

9.4 Effective and early intervention and prevention initiatives must be used to ensure children and young people are diverted from the youth justice system. Such measures must be provided by the health, education and VCS and developed in consultation with young people, their families, and the Youth Justice System.

9.5 All children and young people must have reasonable adjustments made to meet their additional support needs during court proceedings (virtual or in real time) including access to an independent advocate. Their attendance in person must always be facilitated.

\textsuperscript{46} UN (2020) Op Cit.
10. ASSESSMENT OF RESPONSE TO UN COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS: SUMMARY
Assessment of response to UN Committee recommendations: Summary

This section summarises NICCY’s assessment of Governments’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic to date against the 11 recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The full text of the recommendations is provided in Chapter 1.

1. Consider the health, social, educational, economic and recreational impacts of the pandemic on the rights of the child.

This recommendation recognises that in crisis situations international human rights law exceptionally permits restrictions for limited periods to protect public health, but that they should be imposed only as necessary, be proportionate and kept to a minimum. It also reminds states that responses to the pandemic must reflect the principle of the best interests of the child.

Early in the pandemic response it was stated that children generally were unlikely to be particularly badly affected by the COVID-19 virus as, on infection, their symptoms were less severe than those of adults, particularly elderly people and/or those with an existing health condition. However, the response to the pandemic has had a severe impact on children’s right to health, both in terms of their physical and mental health, and on their education, their family incomes and protection from harm and led to many being socially isolated.

NICCY accepts that restrictions on children’s lives, as with the rest of the population, were necessary to protect public health - particularly the elderly and vulnerable in society. Nonetheless there was insufficient consideration given to children’s right to health and rights overall, including their best interests, particularly in the earliest days of the pandemic response. The Coronavirus Act 2020 provided sweeping powers to amend the Public Health Act to take action to combat the spread of the virus, and many of these amendments were made without consultation or the usual scrutiny processes. Whilst recognising the requirement for timely actions, the Commissioner has raised concern at the lack of consultation with the Office in the development of the emergency legislation and its impact on children’s rights.

As outlined throughout this report, the situation has improved over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it remains the assessment of NICCY that the UK Government and NI Executive should have, from the initial stages, applied a child rights lens to the pandemic, undertook child rights impact assessments (CRIAs) and considered children’s best interests proactively as decisions were made. This should be rectified in the continuing pandemic response and in recovery planning, or in any future public health emergency.

See also Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.
2. Explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities.

There was an insufficient focus in the COVID-19 pandemic response on ensuring that children’s rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities were addressed. It is clear from the children and young people with whom we engaged through surveys and focus groups how important friendships and developing relationships are throughout childhood and into the teenage years, and how deeply they have felt the restrictions on their social interactions. Many expressed a deep sense of loss for important times they felt they missed and would never get back. The research data shows that the decline in play, recreational and leisure activities has had a devastating impact on many children’s physical health and emotional wellbeing.

Many children and young people spoke generally about feeling lonely and trapped, particularly during the first lockdown when they couldn’t physically go out and meet anyone and even parks were closed for many months. At this time, people were only able to take one short walk a day and weren’t allowed to sit outside in public. While people could be outside in their own gardens, many didn’t have an outside space. Young people told us that staying indoors all day was very difficult.

As education moved to home learning in lockdown many young people felt that the boundaries between school and leisure time had blurred. Not being able to socialise with friends or take part in sports or recreational activities meant that there were few opportunities to vent. When restrictions were eased this allowed most children and young people to get outside more and to meet up with friends, however, many felt great anxiety about social contact because they were shielding or because of vulnerable family members.

While efforts were made to organise activities and events for children and young people using online platforms, this is not a substitute for play, recreation and leisure activities over the longer term. Moreover, the needs of children and young people for play, recreational activities and social interaction have not been prioritised in the easing of restrictions, and many have felt judged and scapegoated when they have met up with friends in public spaces.

The feedback from young people is that this is an area which has been overlooked in the COVID-19 response and so this must be a primary focus for the Northern Ireland Executive over the coming months.

See also Chapters 3 and 5.
3. Ensure that online learning does not exacerbate existing inequalities or replace student-teacher interaction.

A consistent theme arising from consultation with children and young people is that remote learning is not the same as in-school learning; feedback reflected the fact that it is less structured, largely untimetabled and that an undue degree of responsibility was placed on children and young people to manage their work in their own time. The latter was deemed particularly challenging for young people in exam years, many of whom talked about the weight of expectation placed on them in terms of the volume and range of work to be completed at home. Some had consequently disengaged. Many reflected on poor motivation and on difficulty in maintaining focus at home; others highlighted how they had fallen behind with their education.

There is a strong evidence base that highlights digital poverty as a barrier to enabling online ‘remote’ learning in areas where there are high levels of economic and social disadvantage and lack of connectivity in rural areas. Schools have acknowledged an absence or inadequate numbers of appropriate digital devices for learning within the household and an absence of reliable access to broadband or wi-fi within the household as barriers to learning during both phases of lockdown.

Such findings chime with reports received by NICCY of children and young people in need of a device but unable to gain access to one. Despite investment by DE in additional devices and a free Wi-Fi scheme for disadvantaged pupils, the relatively slow allocation of devices meant that many children were without a digital device for much of the first period of school closures. Indeed, some remained without these during the second period of closure from January 2021. Furthermore, NICCY’s research with vulnerable young people highlights that, despite needs which should have precipitated the provision of devices, some young people did not receive a device for quite some time.

It is evident that the need to address digital exclusion remains to ensure equity of experience, in case a pupil is required to isolate at home, and in case of future waves of the virus.

See also Chapter 4.
From the start of the pandemic, there was an immediate focus by the Northern Ireland Executive and voluntary and community sector on ensuring access to nutritious food for vulnerable households, including those with children. Statutory and voluntary sectors worked together to provide food boxes as an emergency response on demand, in recognition that problems accessing food were not only due to poverty, but also for people who were shielding or for single parents who were not permitted to take their children into shops with them due to the restrictions that were in place.

In addition to the food parcels provided to low-income households, the NI Executive provided direct payments to families whose children would usually benefit from a school meal. Around 100,000 families received £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools were closed, paid directly into their bank accounts on a fortnightly basis. This was originally intended to cover only the usual school term up to 30 June during the first lockdown, but the Executive subsequently agreed to continue the payments over the school summer holidays and the Halloween half term break. In November 2020, the Education and Communities Ministers stated that these payments would continue during all school holidays up to Easter 2022; these payments were also continued during the second lockdown in Winter/Spring 2021.

While direct payments in lieu of Free School Meals were also made across the UK, the Northern Ireland Executive led the way by the speed in which they took this forward under the first lockdown, then extending it to include school holidays and into the future.

See also Chapter 2.

Before the pandemic, demand for child health services outstripped capacity and waiting lists were a growing problem which affected children and young people’s access to high quality treatment and care. During the pandemic, many statutory services scaled back their services, prioritising ‘emergency’, ‘urgent’ or ‘essential’ services. Due to this scaling back, existing health issues, waiting times and health inequalities in Northern Ireland have been exacerbated. There has been an increase in the numbers of and length of time children and young people are waiting for healthcare across a range of acute and community-based services.
Several reports have been critical of the disproportionate blanket application of health-related policy or guidance during the pandemic. These referred to a lack of assessment of its implications for children as a group, a lack of service specific risk assessments, person-centred care around matters such as when and how services should close or reopen, and the implementation of policy around hospital visits.

Mental health has been one of the most discussed impacts of the pandemic and particularly so in relation to children and young people. Whilst many children and young people will have maintained good emotional wellbeing and mental health during the pandemic, a significant number have experienced a deterioration. A significant increase in referrals to CAMHS has been predicted post lockdown, the full impact of which is yet to be seen by services. However, young people are presenting to statutory services with much more complex mental ill health, including those with pre-existing mental health problems whose conditions have been made worse by the impact of the pandemic and response to it. The long-term impact of the pandemic on children and young people’s mental health has the potential to be significant, particularly if appropriate support and intervention is not provided.

While birth registration was delayed for a period of time during the first lockdown, we have no evidence that this impacted on services. However, for a significant part of the pandemic, Health Visitors were redeployed to provide COVID-19 related care and services resulting in a reduction in the number of health assessments and home visits. Reductions in health visiting appointments, in addition to restrictions in access to other early years services, removed an important support system for parents, particularly first-time mothers and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

At the beginning of the vaccine roll-out in NI, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization (JCVI) advised that vaccination of certain groups of clinically extremely vulnerable 16 and 17-year-olds was reasonably safe and effective. Only in July 2021, was the decision made to offer the vaccine to specific groups of children aged 12 years and over. Whilst understandable that clear evidence of risk versus benefit was required before making such a decision, this delay has often meant very lengthy periods of shielding and ongoing stress and anxiety for children and their families. There remain questions over what non-vaccination will mean for children’s rights with respect to access to travel, hospitality / leisure and employment and work to be done with regards to informed consent, particularly where young people and their parents do not agree.

The prevailing evidence is that the direct health risk from COVID-19 on most children and young people is low; however there is growing concern about the effect of ‘long Covid’ for some children, particularly those with a history of infection. Furthermore, as government policy starts to distinguish between vaccinated and unvaccinated people including in relation to the roll out of ‘vaccination certificates’ or ‘vaccination passports’, there is concern that unvaccinated children and young people will be treated differently in relation to access to travel, hospitality / leisure and employment.

See also Chapter 3.
6. Define core child protection services as essential and ensure that they remain functioning and available, including home visits when necessary, and provide professional mental health services for children living in lockdown.

In the study undertaken by QUB on behalf of NICCY, participants from across statutory, voluntary and community sectors all expressed serious concern about the safety of children and young people during the pandemic. In addition to noting concerns relating to trends in referrals and reporting, participants highlighted workforce pressures with staff and services who play a key role in safeguarding, such as health visiting, being redirected or redeployed elsewhere within the health system and significant reductions in workforce availability due to COVID-19 related absences at key points in the pandemic. We note that health and social care in Northern Ireland operates with persistent challenges in relation to absence rates and vacant posts leaving services at greater vulnerability when under any additional pressures.

NICCY is mindful that there is little Northern Ireland reporting to date which provides a more qualitative insight into how key professionals, such as social workers, managed the impact of the crisis while protecting children. However, during engagement with professionals, QUB noted participants’ concerns that with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there had been a shift from early intervention and prevention support to crisis intervention responses. More positively, practitioners also identified that learning from the first lockdown period was incorporated into later responses to safeguarding children.

Across children’s social care the immediate response to the pandemic took the form of Surge Planning and use of a regional Action Card to guide statutory responses alongside sector specific guidance, such as on the use of PPE and on childcare, supported living and adoption services. This was accompanied by a Vulnerable Children and Young People Plan, brought forward by the Northern Ireland Executive and developed by the departments of Health, Education, Justice, Economy and Communities. It is important to reflect that the Plan sought to embed a cross-departmental and multi-agency approach and to establish a broad definition of children who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19.

See also Chapter 7.

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Across this report NICCY has identified groups of vulnerable children whose rights have been particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. While few children and young people have escaped the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been experienced in the same way by all.

For some households the pandemic has had little effect on their financial situation while others have experienced significant hardship and difficulties making ends meet. Children in poverty were identified as being particularly impacted by the move to online education, as they were more likely not to have access to an appropriate digital device or online IT access. They were also more likely to be living in accommodation that did not have adequate inside or outside space to study and for recreational activities in lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore has the potential of further entrenching the existing socio-economic inequalities.

Existing barriers faced by children with disabilities or complex health needs in accessing support and services significantly worsened during the pandemic. It has been reported that children with disabilities and pre-existing and life-limiting conditions faced the most disruption to access to healthcare. Families with disabled children experienced a reduction in both formal and informal support during the pandemic.

Whilst the full impact of school closures on children’s education and wellbeing is unlikely to be known for some time yet, it is evident that some groups of children and young people have experienced its effects more acutely than others. Groups most negatively affected include children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with special educational needs or disabilities in mainstream and special schools, and newcomer groups. Other vulnerable groups include those accessing EOTAS; receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection, and looked after children services; those on the Child Protection Register; young carers; those with emerging and diagnosed mental health needs; and those affected by domestic violence.

Children with experience of care and secure care have given powerful testimony to NICCY on the impact of not being able to have in person contact with social workers and other professionals and visits with family members, particularly at times of both family celebrations or family illness. Young people have also highlighted disparities in
the operation of COVID-19 restrictions on arrangements for visiting and outings across different parts of the care system. Across this report NICCY has identified groups of vulnerable children whose rights have been particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. While few children and young people have escaped the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been experienced in the same way by all.

Young people subject to immigration control were particularly vulnerable to feelings of isolation and stress due to a lack of social and other activities and visits. Concerns were expressed about reductions in face-to-face contact with key professionals, such as social workers and legal representatives, including in relation to preparing for key events such as asylum interviews with the Home Office. Young people’s experiences also highlighted the particular difficulties for separated and asylum-seeking children who may have arrived in Northern Ireland just prior to, or during, the pandemic period and who did not have pre-existing friendship networks, school or college connections, or sporting or faith community links to draw on.

These are just some examples of the groups of vulnerable children and young people, and some of the ways their vulnerabilities were further increased through the pandemic. The Northern Ireland Executive brought forward a ‘Vulnerable Children and Young People Plan’ which established a broad definition of children who are particularly vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 and sought to embed a cross-departmental and multi-agency approach. While this made a start in addressing the particular challenges faced by vulnerable children and young people, as the Northern Ireland Executive looks to drive recovery forward, it must ensure a focus on the most disadvantaged children and young people and their families.

See also Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9.
8. Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.

There was no evidence of children in detention being released as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

There was an immediate cessation of all external visitors to young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre, including visits from family. While they were provided virtual access to families and friends through online technology such as Zoom and Skype, there was a noted reluctance among the young people to engage with these forms of communication. Some found it hard to adapt or mistrusted the privacy of the calls. This led to feelings of disconnectedness and isolation. During the first 10 days after a young person entered the JJC, they had to be isolated from others in the Centre and could only have access to phone calls with family and friends.

During focus groups with young people in alternative care, NICCY heard powerful testimony from young people about the difficulties arising from restrictions on face-to-face contact with family and professionals. Young people in secure care said that visiting had been curtailed because of COVID-19 and that Zoom calls were not as good as a face-to-face visits. They said it was sometimes difficult to maintain contact virtually as the IT equipment was broken or it did not work properly. Some reported problems trying to contact social workers and commented that the lack of contact made it difficult for them to build relationships. Similarly to young people in the JJC, they said that COVID-19 had made things more difficult for young people coming into secure care as they also had to isolate when they arrived.

NICCY’s legal team supported a sixteen-year-old being treated as an inpatient in a mental health facility. At the beginning of ‘lockdown’ the unit advised that direct visits from her immediate family could no longer take place. After a review of Covid-related regulations and practice applied in other medical settings, NICCY made representations to the psychiatric unit noting that their policy made less allowance for visits than comparable settings. The visitation policy at the unit was changed to allow direct contact.

See also Chapters 3, 6 and 9.
Throughout the focus groups conducted by NICCY, a common theme emerged from vulnerable children and young people, particularly those estranged from families and living independently, that they had to negotiate lockdown restrictions and the implications on their mental wellbeing because of enforced isolation. Prior to social bubbling, some young people actively made decisions to break COVID-19 regulations to limit their own mental health decline or that of their peers.

The PSNI created a direction for officers, ‘Engage, Explain, Encourage and finally Enforce’ as their primary means of engagement with children and young people suspected of breaking lockdown regulations, with the open methods of engagement primarily asking children and young people ‘are you ok’, rather than ‘why are you out’. However, between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, there were a total of 585 Community Resolution Notices issued to under 18s by the PSNI related to the contravention of the Coronavirus Health Protection Regulations.

While media stories suggested that these breaches were common, the vast majority of children and young people adhered closely to issued regulations and guidelines. Despite this, children and young people maintained they felt demonised and discriminated against by adults when they met together in public as restrictions relaxed.

See also Chapters 5 and 9.
Young people have expressed frustration that there was seemingly little consideration on how communications would have been received by them and whether it would be informative, understandable or simply confusing. The ever-changing guidance and advice made for inconsistency and confusion. Young people felt they were negatively stereotyped and blamed for spreading the virus.

In many cases it seems that NGOs and community and youth organisations filled the information void, passing on key messages and guidance on measures to protect themselves in formats appropriate to their audience – especially to the most vulnerable young people, for example, young people with disabilities or migrant young people. There is no evidence that there was a co-ordinated structural system for messaging which, if in place, would have improved the speed and accuracy of information reaching children and young people, especially our most vulnerable.

See also Chapter 8.

For many years young people have been asking to have a say in our society, to have their voices heard and make a vital contribution to community at large. For many years, when given the opportunity, young people have also demonstrated that they can make an immense contribution to society.

During the initial lockdown period when high level strategic decisions were being made, children and young people’s involvement or engagement in decision making was not a priority. While some subsequent efforts were made to engage with children and young people, in general, they felt they had been excluded from expressing their views, opinions and ideas and that there were few opportunities for them to have a say on issues affecting them during the pandemic.

See also Chapter 8.
11. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Conclusion

Having reviewed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in Northern Ireland, it is clear that despite sudden and previously ‘unthinkable’ changes in the way we lived our lives, protected and delivered for children and young people, in reality there was clear continuity flowing from what had gone before. The inequalities present in our society, the vulnerabilities associated with disabilities, physical or mental ill health, and fault lines that existed in socio-economic differences and family circumstances amongst others, have been greatly exacerbated. This led to further widening of chasms in exposing the uneven impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic responses on children and young people.

Of course, no child was untouched by the pandemic – all faced social isolation and adverse impacts on their lives and education. However, where they had the support of families who could focus on their wellbeing and had the resources to address their needs, most children and young people should be able to transition back to ‘normal’ – hopefully a ‘new and better normal’ – fairly unproblematically. For others though like the young people who were bereaved by COVID-19, children and young people with disabilities who were not able to access critical services for months at a time, those who could not access health treatments, children whose parents lost their jobs, young people who have suffered mental ill health, families with newborn babies, families facing challenges of poverty and/or mental health without access to the full range of support, those in secure justice or care settings, those who couldn’t engage in education due to digital poverty, and vulnerable newcomer, refugee or asylum seeking children - their needs should be prioritised in the COVID-19 recovery process.

It is the case that the degree to which the processes in implementing children’s rights are already effective and embedded in government policies and service delivery processes prior to a public emergency, will determine the degree to which children’s rights are prioritised during the emergency response. In this case, the support structures have been tested and in many ways have been found to be effective whilst in others have been found wanting. Efforts were made to maintain safeguarding systems, there were high levels of compliance with public health messages, and government established programmes to address unemployment, destitution and homelessness and to support the continuation of children’s education in lockdown. However, other problems have also been exposed in this public health emergency – the invisibility of some vulnerable groups of children and young people, the lack of adequate, timely and easily accessible data on critical matters, the withdrawal of critical services for children with highly complex needs, the insecurity of employment for parents in low-income families, access for children and young people to physical and mental health services, children and young people without digital devices and online connectivity missing out on education, to name a few.

While we welcome the focus of the Executive on developing and implementing a COVID-19 Recovery Plan, this must not become another layer of planning separate from the Programme for Government, the Children and Young People’s Strategy and all the important strategies that fall under these. These must be integral to, and inform, each other. We must learn the lesson that, alongside the vital actions required to support recovery, there must be a focus on embedding a child rights culture within the fundamental workings of government and its agencies so that, whether we face another public emergency or not, we are tackling the deep inequalities that have been laid bare over the COVID-19 pandemic.
Recommendations

Delivering more effectively for children in the continuing COVID-19 pandemic response

Young people have highlighted the lack of clarity in communication and information received about COVID-19 from both health and education perspectives, referencing confusion, inaccessibility and mixed messages. They also were very critical about how they felt their voices were not heard throughout lockdown, leading to little faith and confidence in leadership from Government and a question as to whether political leaders had their best interests to the fore.

1.1 As the response to the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the rights and best interests of children and young people must take priority in decision making. The NI Executive, its Departments and Agencies must ensure meaningful engagement with children, young people and their parents prior to making decisions on enhancing or relaxing restrictions, and to understand the implications for children and their families.

Prioritising infants, children and young people in the Executive’s COVID-19 Recovery Plan

As we move out of the pandemic, more children and young people and their families are living in poverty, health waiting lists are unacceptably long, many have had their education adversely impacted due to lack of access to digital equipment, children in care and other vulnerable groups have not received the support they need. These are significant problems which cannot be resolved without an explicit focus in the recovery plans and the allocation of substantial additional resources.

1.2 The Northern Ireland Executive’s COVID-19 Recovery Plan (CRP) must prioritise children and their families and should be informed by the recommendations contained in this report. A child rights impact assessment (CRIA) process should inform its development. The CRP must be integrated with the Programme for Government and the commitments contained in NDNA, and the Children and Young People’s Strategy should be the key delivery mechanisms for children and young people, along with the other important strategies that fall under these. The CRP must be fully costed and funded.

While few can have escaped the impact of COVID-19, it has not been experienced in the same manner by all children and young people. There is clear evidence that the pandemic exacerbated existing social, financial, health and educational inequalities and vulnerable children and young people were more adversely affected than others. Without
a determined effort by the Northern Ireland Executive to support those who have been particularly adversely affected, there is a danger that pre-existing inequalities will widen further and become entrenched. As the Northern Ireland Executive looks to drive the recovery from Covid forward, it must ensure a focus on the most disadvantaged children and young people and their families.

1.3 The NI Executive’s COVID-19 Recovery Plan must include a focus on vulnerable groups of children and young people, address socio-economic inequalities and inequalities within the education, youth justice and health and social care systems.

In general, staff working in the public sector have responded exceptionally well to the pandemic and there is evidence that many went the extra mile to ensure children and young people received the support they needed. As the lockdown lifts, it is clear that in many key services staff are exhausted and that public services across the board need to rebuild. This will be a considerable challenge, given that many key children and young peoples’ services (e.g., CAMHS) pre-COVID-19 were inadequately resourced leading to unacceptable waiting times, and the demand for these services has significantly increased as a result of the pandemic.

1.4 The NI Executive must identify the financial, staffing and other interventions required to rebuild our public services post-COVID-19 and take prompt and effective action to ensure this support is provided to those areas where it is needed.

While clearly there was a need for emergency legislation to be introduced in response to the pandemic, nevertheless given that the powers were put in place for a period of two years, the limited legislative scrutiny was a matter for concern. Arguably this was justifiable at the start of the pandemic when extensive changes were required within a very short period. However, over time, the accountability processes should have been extended again in a proportionate manner to allow for more engagement with relevant bodies such as NICCY for more meaningful scrutiny of the many regulations made.

1.5 The Northern Ireland Executive should commission an independent review of the emergency legislation developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the processes for developing this, including in relation to legislative scrutiny and the degree to which processes (including statutory obligations and equality screening) were followed in its development and implementation. This should consider how the legislation and its implementation met international standards and provide guidance for the development of emergency legislation in any future public health emergencies. The current emergency powers should come to an end as soon as possible and not be extended beyond the emergency period.
Planning for the future

The NI Executive’s initial response to the pandemic was reactive and it appears that there was little planning in place for largescale public health emergencies such as COVID-19. While the response improved over time, it is imperative that if we are faced with a similar health crisis in the future, public services’ plans should be able to respond more effectively by ‘learning’ from the experience of this pandemic and putting in place emergency measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and to minimise the disruption to the lives of children and young people.

1.6 The Northern Ireland Executive must prepare contingency plans for future emergencies to ensure they are better prepared and able to respond in a more systematic and coordinated way, and that children’s rights and best interests are a primary consideration throughout.

The UK Government has signed up to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals and the ‘Paris Agreement’ to tackle climate change. Children and young people have been very vocal over recent years about the need for Government to take a long-term focus on sustainability and the need for action on climate change. They have been demanding major changes in how we live our lives to protect the environment now, and for future generations. The global emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes to lifestyles that resulted, represented a break from what had been considered ‘normality’ and offers a chance to build back more sustainably and more fairly. We have all lived through changes that would have been unimaginable in January 2020 and this provides an opportunity to make radical adjustments as we recover from the pandemic and look to the future.

1.7 The Northern Ireland Executive must re-commit to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and its NDNA actions on climate change. The Executive should engage with children and young people to hear about their vision for the future and for the improved society we should be ‘building back’.
Poverty

2.1 The NI Executive’s Coronavirus Recovery Plan must prioritise rebuilding the economy with a focus on those who have been hardest hit, including unemployed young people and families in low-income work. The new Jobstart youth employment programme should be monitored and adapted as it is rolled out to ensure that it is providing the maximum benefit to young unemployed, or underemployed people.

2.2 The £20 additional weekly payment should be maintained on a permanent basis. At the same time the UK social security system should be transformed so that, once again, it becomes an effective ‘safety net’ for all in society. Benefits must be sufficient to provide an adequate standard of living to all recipients. A Minimum Income Guarantee should be provided, with the goal of ensuring that this is set at a level so that no children are living below the poverty line.

2.3 Until the social security system is transformed, the Northern Ireland Executive should extend the mitigations package to include elements to address child poverty and provide support for low income families, including continuing the mitigations relating to the social sector size criteria, the benefit cap, the payment for children transferring from DLA to PIP and the following new elements:

- mitigation payments for families affected by the two-child limit and removal of the family elements of tax credits;
- grants to address costs associated with employment;
- a per-child payment for low income families; and
- an expanded payment for low income families with young children.

2.4 The NI Executive should develop an ambitious Anti-Poverty Strategy, which should have a vision of eradicating child poverty, provide specific commitments on how it will progressively reduce child poverty over time, and a fully resourced delivery plan.

2.5 Eligibility for Free School Meals should be reviewed to ensure all children in poverty are included. Direct payments in lieu of FSMs should continue to be provided over school holidays on a permanent basis.
Health

3.1 The NI Executive must adopt a cross-departmental mechanism which is committed to taking a ‘child health in all policies’ approach in all decisions at both regional and local levels.

3.2 The Health and Social Care rebuilding plans must be underpinned by the principles of children’s rights and focus on systemic reform which strengthens their reach to all infants, children and young people through universal services and targeted provisions for the most disadvantaged.

3.3 The DoH response to the health waiting list crisis must include specific planning and resourcing to address health waiting lists for under 18s.

3.4 The NI Executive Covid Recovery Plan should ensure children’s right to health is prioritised and that a comprehensive range of emotional wellbeing and mental health services are in place to meet the immediate needs of parents and carers, infants, children, and young people caused by the pandemic.

3.5 The HSC system should ensure that changes made to child health services in response to COVID-19 are fully evaluated and only retained and mainstreamed where they offer greater flexibility, choice and improved access and quality of care to children and young people.

3.6 In any future public health emergency, the following measures should be taken:

   i. Restrictions to child health services should fully respect the best interests of the child, only be applied where necessary, be proportionate and remain in place for the shortest time possible.

   ii. Where access to allied health related services such as speech and language therapy, educational psychology, and occupational therapy are impacted, alternative ways for children to access support must be provided.

   iii. Public health emergency planning should have a child rights impact assessment process embedded within it to ensure that decisions take account of children’s rights and best interests.

   iv. Health and Social Care Services should have access to a robust Child Health Information system to ensure accurate and timely information is provided to all clinically vulnerable children and their families.
Education

4.1 In order to truly understand the extent of engagement and the subsequent impact on children’s development and attainment, there must be an assessment of the effectiveness of the education that children received during school closures and a benchmarking of any learning lost or gained over the course of lockdown.

4.2 Education and Health Bodies should report on how they have identified, met, and will continue to provide for the needs of vulnerable children, and ensure that issues which previously prevented the full-time opening of special schools are identified and addressed.

4.3 Ongoing guidance and support must be provided to schools to ensure safe and sustainable openings and robust plans be in place to effect facilitation of blended learning should disruptions occur between home study and study at school.

4.4 Robust mechanisms must be established by the DE and EA to ensure that there is a central record of all children who require access to a device and/or the internet and the number of children who remain without.

4.5 Additional supports must be provided to children and young people who were unable to fully engage with learning during school closures. Robust evaluation data must be gathered to explore the impact of both school summer schemes and the Engage 2 Programme and that there is an ongoing identification of any further supports required by children and young people.

4.6 There must be ongoing contingency planning for alternative awarding in 2022 in case of any change in the public health situation. This must build on the learning of the determination of centre assessed grades in 2021 and, essentially, must ensure young people are at the heart of discussions and decision making.

4.7 The Department of Education must work with schools to establish alternative contingency arrangements for the transfer from primary to post-primary school. This must include a set of common admissions criteria which must be statutorily enforced by the Department of Education to ensure equitability and accessibility for all pupils.
Play, Leisure and Social Engagement

5.1 The Executive, Agencies, Councils and service deliverers should consult with young people as they make changes to restrictions and prioritise safe re-opening of venues and services that are important to them including youth clubs, sports clubs, cinemas, gyms, open air concerts, activity centres, leisure centres. Parks should be kept open and children and young people facilitated to meet there safely, and without being demonised.

5.2 The Northern Ireland Executive should provide a financial package dedicated to overcoming the loss of play and recreational activities over the COVID-19 pandemic, and the social isolation experienced by children and young people. This should be used to increase the provision of facilities, programmes and events appropriate to different ages of children and young people up to 18, and a process of children’s budgeting and consultation used to determine how it is spent.

5.3 Consideration should be given to a ‘social incentive scheme’ for children and young people, providing them with provide free access, vouchers or discounts for cinema tickets, concerts, waterparks, indoor play places, gym memberships, arts and craft activities, and driving lessons. This could be similar to the ‘High Street Voucher Scheme’ due to be rolled out in NI.

5.4 When schools are open, every effort should be made to ensure that safe extracurricular activities like sports, orchestra, choir, clubs and drama start up again. Schools should be aware of the impact of social isolation and home schooling on anxiety and mental health and there should more emphasis on balancing schoolwork and wellbeing.

5.5 As restrictions are relaxed, there should be a focus on the key social occasions that have been missed by children and young people, both in terms of ensuring that these happen at the time but also, where possible, facilitating events and occasions that have been missed in lockdown. These include events marking the transitions between schools or leaving school, school events and school trips, sporting events and formals.
Family Life and Alternative Care

6.1 The Department of Health’s ‘Family and Parenting Support Strategy’ should comprehensively consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, young people, their parents and carers, and wider families. It must set out a series of mitigations and additional provisions to address any adverse impacts on family and home life.

6.2 Any barriers to maintaining contact between children and family members, including e.g., where parents are separated or family members are in prison, must be identified and provisions made to ensure that there is no further disruption to contact.

6.3 The full provision of respite services must be safely available to families of children with disabilities and complex needs both in the recovery period and in any future emergency situations.

6.4 The Department of Health should explore the issues that resulted in the inconsistent use of the Children’s Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children’s Social Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 across different areas of social care and different HSCTs, in order to ensure greater consistency in practice and compliance with timeframes across HSCTs in Northern Ireland.

Safeguarding

7.1 Government and statutory agencies must ensure that COVID-19 restrictions are implemented consistently and equitably across children’s social care, with particular reference to visits and outings in all care settings.

7.2 There should be a clear government commitment to ensure face-to-face contact with children where there are safeguarding concerns or where children are cared for by the State at all times. Any pauses in this should be in the most limited of circumstances, when absolutely necessary, for the shortest time possible, and would require more stringent regulatory and monitoring arrangements than have been in place in the 2020-21 period.

7.3 A thorough and ongoing assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on safeguarding should be undertaken. The experiences and views of children and young people as well as those who care for them and practitioners should directly inform this and the recovery and rebuilding of children’s social care.

7.4 The Children and Young People Strategy (CYPS) and its Delivery Plan should be informed by the feedback on the consultation on the Vulnerable Children and Young People’s Plan and adapted as necessary to provide a robust framework for safeguarding children during the current continuing uncertainty and in any future crisis.
**Information and Participation**

8.1 Each Government Department should prioritise developing information for children and young people, especially those most vulnerable, in an appropriate, relevant style and format, in conjunction with information provided for the wider population.

8.2 Each Government Department should sign up to and endorse the Northern Ireland Participation Policy as developed through the CYPS Participation in Decision Making initiative led by DE and provide the appropriate resources and training to ensure that a network of participation structures is established.

8.3 Executive Ministers should engage with and communicate directly with young people on matters that impact on their lives.

**Youth Justice**

9.1 The PSNI must continue to embed a best interest and trauma informed approach to the young people it comes into contact with, including those accused of breaching COVID-19 restrictions, ensuring that arrest and detention are a measure of last resort.¹

9.2 Reflecting on the findings of the current survey work, the use of Stop and Search powers must be fundamentally reviewed and revised to ensure the most effective use of such powers that promotes children’s best interests and community safety.

9.3 Spit and bite guards should not be used where officers or staff are aware or believe that a member of the public is under 18.

9.4 Effective and early intervention and prevention initiatives must be used to ensure children and young people are diverted from the youth justice system. Such measures must be provided by the health, education and VCS and developed in consultation with young people their families and the Youth Justice System.

9.5 All children and young people must have reasonable adjustments made to meet their additional support needs during court proceedings (virtual or in real time) including access to an independent advocate. Their attendance in person must always be facilitated.

¹ UN 2020 Op Cit
APPENDICES
## COVID-19 pandemic timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event/Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>23 March to 14 May 2020</strong></td>
<td><strong>First full lockdown</strong></td>
<td>- Schools closed (except to vulnerable and key worker children)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Only ‘essential’ shops open</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- People asked to work from home</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- No meeting up between households</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>14 May to mid-August 2020</strong></td>
<td><strong>Easing of restrictions</strong></td>
<td>- More businesses and shops able to open</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Households able to meet outside</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Schools remain closed (including summer hols)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Decisions about exam grades</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mid-August to 25 December</strong></td>
<td><strong>Return to school Tightening restrictions</strong></td>
<td>- Schools open, social distancing guidance</td>
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<td><strong>2020</strong></td>
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<td>- Restrictions tighten again, varying over period</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Household mixing reduced again, bubbling one household</td>
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<td>- Extended Halloween half term holiday</td>
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<td><strong>26 December 2020 to 7</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second full lockdown</strong></td>
<td>- Schools closed again (except to vulnerable and key worker children, and Special Schools)</td>
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<td><strong>March 2021</strong></td>
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<td>- Only ‘essential’ shops open</td>
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<td>- People asked to work from home</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- No meeting up between households except where bubbling</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Decisions re AQE and cancellation of external exams</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8 March to 12 April 2021</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second return to school</strong></td>
<td>- Nursery, Preschool and P1-3 children returned on 8 March</td>
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<td>- P4 - 7 and Years 12 - 14 returned 22 March</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- All years returned to school on 12 April</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>30 April to end July 2021</strong></td>
<td><strong>Second easing of restrictions</strong></td>
<td>- Schools remain open</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Use of Lateral Flow tests in schools</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Opening outdoor, indoor hospitality, museums, libraries</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Relaxing restrictions on numbers meeting indoors and outside</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>- Delta variant first identified in NI, rising numbers of infections</td>
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</tbody>
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APPENDIX 2:
Government Departments who provided feedback on engagement with children and young people

The following provided feedback on their engagement with children and young people:

The Executive Office

Department of Education
- ALBs including CCEA, Educational Authority’s Educational Psychology Service and Youth Service

Department of Health
- ALBs including HSCB and The Safeguarding Board for NI
- Supported NGOs including VOYPIC, Include Youth

Department of Justice
- ALBs including PSNI, JJC

Department for Infrastructure
- ALBs including Translink and NI Water

Department for Communities
- ALBs including Sport NI, Libraries NI
- Supported NGOs and Community groups including 174 Trust, Belfast Community Circus, Belfast Community Arts Partnership, Belfast

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
- ALBs including CAFRE
Cover image: Rainbows submitted by children and community groups to the MAC’s In a Rainbow of Coalitions exhibition, displayed in the Tall Gallery

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Please contact the communications team at NICCY if you require an alternative format of this material.